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PIONEER WESTERN

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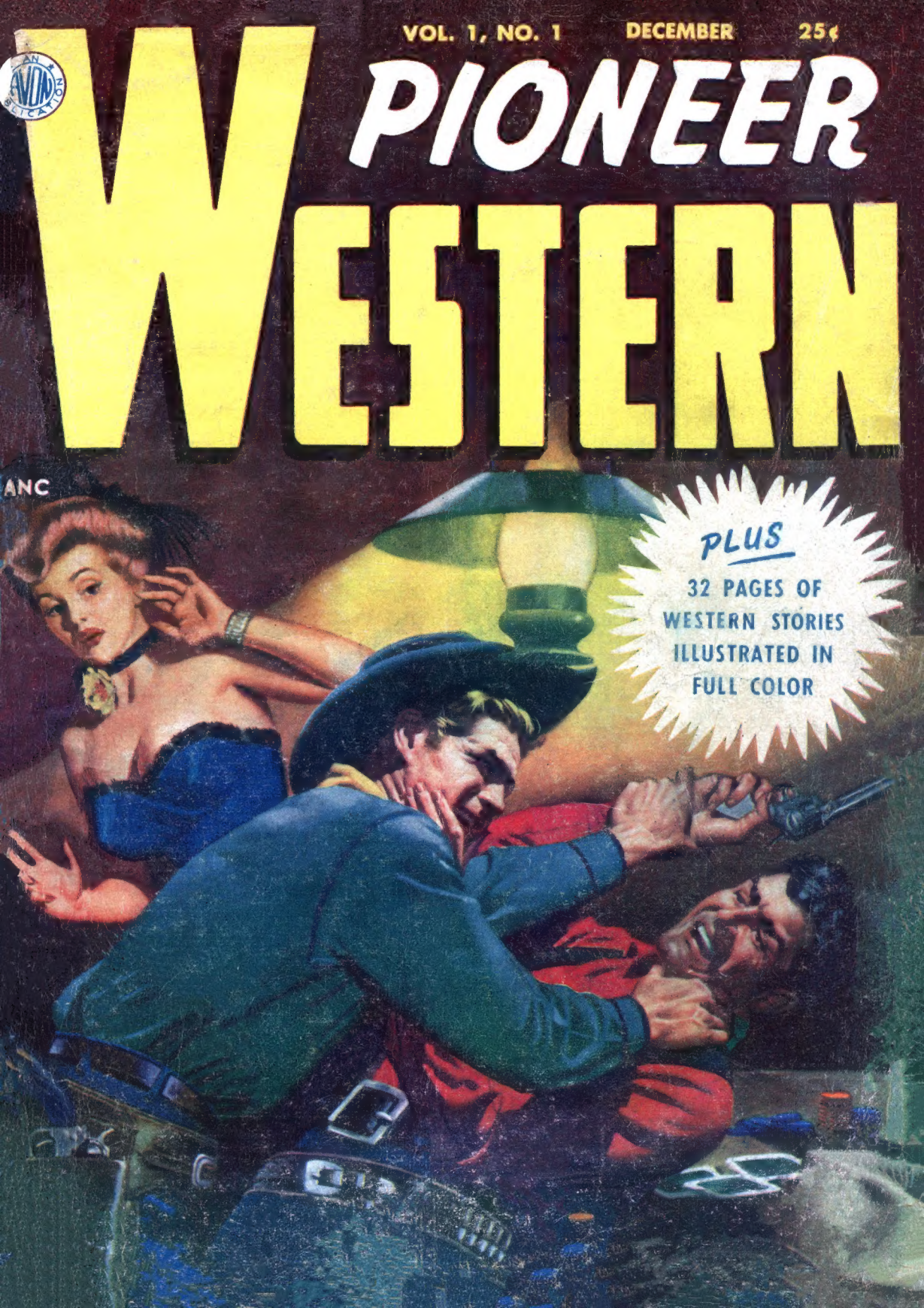

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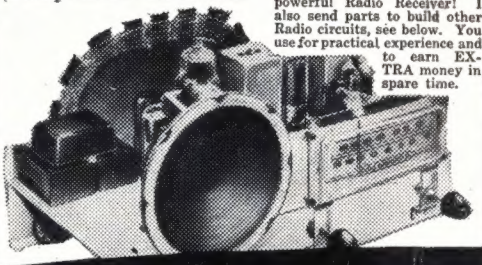

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VOL. 1, NO. 1

PIONEER WESTERN

Donald A. Wollheim, Editor

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2. THE CRAWFORD EXPEDITION
3. THE SAN PEDRO PASS MASSACRE

THE TEXAS RANGER AND THE WHITE COMANCHE ..... E. J. Bellin
Illustrated by E. Balter

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The hidden gunman of Boulder Gulch had slain every miner who tried to cash in on the mountain valley's gold diggings. But Prospector Tom Serrell figured on a special way to outwit the bushwhackers—by baiting their ambush trap with his own body!

Lone Wolf Vigilante

CHAPTER I—*Bushwhack Bullets*

A STORM was brewing in the Bitterroots, Tom Serrell noticed as he walked down the ravine toward Pipestone Creek, his carbine in the crook of his arm. The sky was blackening ominously, the wind had a cutting edge, and the snow came in harsh growing flurries. He reached the riverbank where he had spent so many long back-breaking days, and stood staring into the sharpened

NOVELETTE

By ROE RICHMOND

Serrell fought savagely—there could be no holds barred.

# of Boulder Gulch

teeth of the gale, a high solid figure in the blowing snow.

The creek was iced thinly along the shores, the water running dark and cold down the middle, spraying the crystal-sheathed boulders. There was no activity along the stream this December day. He looked at old Archinal's adjacent claim, the diggings that Rumrill had so recently left, the places Baker and Tompkins had worked before they died. Snow frosted the gravel heaps, framed the shaft holes, blurred the outlines of sluice boxes, pans, rockers, and long toms. A lonely desolate scene that

Serrell was saying a silent farewell to this wintry afternoon.

Tom Serrell's mind was made up, set, and nothing was going to alter it. He had planned his departure with care, and the things he meant to do on the way out. Steve Kellett had his will, in case anything should happen to him, as it had to Peter Dodd, Baker, Tompkins — and perhaps Rumrill by now. But Serrell was going, regardless of the menace that hung over every prospector who tried to leave Boulder Gulch with his gold dust.

He was turning back up the draw toward his cabin when a bullet whined close in the gusty air, and the brittle windtorn crack of a rifle came to him as he hit the snow in a headlong dive, rolling and crawling into the shelter of the nearest boulder. Lead was still flying about him, furrowing up long white streamers of snow, chewing viciously at the rock, screeching and lifting showers of stone dust.

The buzzards, he thought, writhing into position to return the fire, which came from across the river. *They can't even wait for me to get on the trail out to Glendale. They must think I took my dust out of Witherill's safe and cached it in the cabin. . . . Or they just want me dead before I turn and open up on them.* . . . He glimpsed a muzzle-flash, thin and pale in the snowfall, and hammered a shot at the cedar bluff beyond the creek. Levering the Spencer he let go with another.

They were still shooting at him, at least three rifles flickering and spanging in those cedars, but they had lost their chance when the first slug missed. They knew it as well as he did. . . .

Wondering who they were, Tom Serrell began hitching backward, working his way toward a bend in the gully that would put him completely out of range of the snipers. His guess would be Hack Gronauer, Skip Schepis and Paul Mesereau, or some other trio from Del Chalfant's Casino, but that was purely guesswork and established nothing. Perhaps, before another sun-up, he could smoke some of Boulder's coyotes out into the open. They had been getting away with stuff like this for a long time now, a great deal too long without any comeback. They had picked a good time today, when all the other nearby miners were in town. They always played it safe, shrewd, close to the belt.

From the shoulder where the ravine turned, Tom Serrell fired steadily at the enemy until the hammer clicked on a spent shell, emptying his carbine in a cold, controlled anger more than anything else. The men on the bluff had ceased shooting. Serrell turned and walked up the grade to the log house he had inherited from Pete Dodd. . . .

THE wind cried at the chinked logs and tore at the oiled rawhide of the cabin windows, as Tom Serrell went about packing his saddlebags and bedroll. There was a heavy snow in that wind, murmuring on the roof and walls, rustling against the window coverings, darkening the afternoon. Packing and drifting on, he thought, an old familiar story. As usual there wasn't much to take. The mining tools and equipment, and household utensils, had already been distributed among neighboring prospectors.

Tom Serrell traveled light and alone. A pair of blankets, mess-kit and grub, a little extra clothing, ammunition for the Spencer .50 and the Colt .44, hunting knife, hatchet and slicker. Strictly utilitarian, no surplus or sentiment, break clean and start fresh somewhere else. . . . This time, however, there was one difference—five thousand dollars in gold dust, waiting for him in Harvey

Witherill's safe in town. The largest stake he had ever accumulated.

He had been in Boulder Gulch nearly a year, a long stay for Tom Serrell, and he had worked his claim on Pipestone Creek quite steadily. Outside of a few drinking bouts with Archinal, Rumrill, Penrose, and others, occasional gambling in Del Chalfant's Casino, and scattered evenings with Alice Witherill or Tess Tremblay, he had done little to alleviate the monotony of panning and sluicing for gold. The digging not rich, it was hard, dull manual labor for a man unsuited to such work, a year out of his life. But worth it, he guessed, provided he could get out of here with that five thousand, and the several hundred more he carried on him.

Tom Serrell had paused to relight his pipe when somebody knocked on the door. Lifting his revolver from the table and stepping aside, he asked who it was. A necessary precaution in this area, where miners sometimes opened their doors to a murderous blast of gunfire.

"It's me, Arch," came the muffled answer. Serrell opened up and Archinal stomped in, shaking snow from his hat and jacket, clawing its matted wetness from his gray beard.

"They got him, Tom," said the old man, swearing and pacing about on bowed legs, chewing his tobacco as if it were bitter.

Tom Serrell knew that he meant Rumrill, who had left the Gulch yesterday. He was angered but not in the least surprised. Very few prospectors got out of the country with their dust these days. Attempting it, they were found shot to death, stripped of their gold pouches and moneybelts.

"You can't get out, Tom," Archinal went on glumly. "Nobody can. A man's a fool to try it—now"

"When's it goin' to get any better, Arch?" inquired Serrell.

Archinal unbuttoned his heavy jacket and placed a bottle of whiskey on the table. "Open her up, Tom, my fingers are stiff. It'd get better, boy, if we could get these flea-brained miners organized."

"Can't do it," Serrell said flatly. "They won't organize. Every man for himself, and dog eat dog. Selfish greed drove them here, and it still rules them."

"So they commit suicide—wholesale."

"They don't think it'll happen to them. They think they're goin' to beat the game, Arch."

"Well, that's what you think too, ain't it?" Archinal growled.

Tom Serrell had uncorked the flask and was pouring whiskey into a couple of glasses, appropriated from a saloon. He smiled and said: "Sure, I'm one of them." They raised their glasses and drank.

"Everybody knows Del Chalfant's mixed up in it."

"Everybody *thinks* so, you mean," corrected Serrell. "So far nobody's lived to identify any of the hold-up men."

"Naturally it's Chalfant and them sharpers of his. Schepis, Mesereau, Gronauer and the rest. They got it writ all over 'em, Tom."

SERRELL sat down on a packing box, but the wiry, wizened little old-timer continued to stamp about in restless fury. Serrell said: "How do they know every time a man draws his poke out of Witherill's safe?"

Archinal shrugged. "The store's always full of customers and loafers and clerks. Some of 'em must do the spottin' for Chalfant. Everybody knows Harv Witherill's honest and square as they come. . . . You still set on bullin' out in this blizzard and gettin' yourself shot all fulla holes, Tom?"

Tom Serrell nodded. "Good time to

try it, Arch. They're celebratin' the holidays in town."

"That didn't help Rumrill none. You got an idea you're bulletproof?"

"Not exactly, Arch," smiled Serrell. "I've been shot before."

Archinal snorted. "In the war, a man had some chance. A hell of a lot more'n he gets in Boulder Gulch, Montana."

"Not much at Cold Harbor."

"I know, you lived through all that and Libbey Prison," said Archinal. "You think you're goin' to live forever now."

Tom Serrell laughed quietly. "Don't think I'd want to, Arch."

"Don't worry on that account. Just try to pack your dust through to Glendale, son."

"That's my intention."

"Hellfire and damnation!" exploded Archinal. "What good's it goin' to do, Tommy, to get yourself killed?"

"I might live long enough to put the finger on the right men."

"You wanta be a hero, huh? They don't put up any statues in the Gulch. A man's lucky to get a pine slab with his name burnt on it."

Tom Serrell smiled slowly. "I know all about heroes, Arch. I'm just sick of this one-sided business, all this killin' without a kickback. Rumrill was a good friend. . . . So were Baker, Dodd, Tompkins, and the rest. Good men, workin' hard to build up a stake, for one reason or another. For their wives, families, their parents or their children. Murdered without a chance, and all they worked for stolen." His mild voice took on feeling and depth as he spoke.

"I know, Tom," said Archinal gruffly. "One thing you can do, is let me and Penny in on it with you."

"No, Arch. I've got to cut it my way, alone."

"A man can't always cut it alone, no matter how good he is," protested Archinal, wagging his gray head. "Sometimes the odds are too long for any man. It'd even 'em some, if you had Penrose and me."

Tom Serrell shook his head and stood up to pour another round of drinks, his dusky blond head glinting in the lamplight. He was a big man in the late twenties, rangy, raw-boned and easy moving, wide and powerful in the shoulders, trim and lithe at the waist, long of arm and leg. His eyes were gray and clear in the rugged strong-boned face, weathered to deep bronze, scarred and tough except for the broad gentle lines of the mouth. He had lived alone and suffered considerably; the marks were on his somber features. He was quiet and reserved, his voice slow and easy, a deliberate mild-mannered man until aroused.

"This is mine, Arch," he said. "You and Penny may have to wrap it up at the finish, but I'm goin' to start it myself."

"What about Alice Witherill?"

Tom Serrell smiled. "A nice girl, but not for me. The man who marries her will have to toe the mark, Arch. Be a community leader, upright and respectable, goin' to church regular, attendin' all genteel social functions, a starched stuffed shirt."

"You think Del Chalfant fills that bill?"

"Better than I do, except that he runs a gamblin' house."

Archinal grunted. "For my money, Tess Tremblay's the only woman in Boulder worth the powder on her face."

"A real woman," agreed Serrell. "A woman of virtue, if she does own the Bonanza Ballroom."

"That's right," Archinal said. "But a man wouldn't want a wife who knew every grubbin' miner in Boulder Gulch by his first name, and had her feet tromped on by most of 'em."

"Who wants a wife anyway?" asked Serrell.

"Why, every man needs one, sooner or later," affirmed Archinal. "I had two of 'em in my time—one good and one bad. The good one died, and the bad one wound up where she belonged, the Barbary Coast. I learned a lot from both of 'em, son. A man wasn't made to live like a lone wolf."

Tom Serrell laughed. "Maybe not, Arch. But some weren't made to be harnessed double either."

Archinal snorted and scratched his ragged gray beard. "You'll get caught, boy, if you live long enough. Don't know how you've run free all this time. I've seen the way they look at you, Alice Witherill, Tess Tremblay, and them dance-hall girls."

Serrell gestured disparagingly. "They look at any man. Especially if they think he's loaded with gold dust."

"Not a lady like Alice."

"Is there so much difference, Arch?" drawled Serrell.

THERE was another thumping on the door, and a gay clear voice announced: "Penrose himself, the pride of the Pipestone!" He entered at Serrell's shout, bringing a gust of snowy wind, flinging off his hat and using it to whip the whiteness from his clothing. "You know, then, about Rummy?" he said, scouting up another chipped glass and pouring himself a drink, his handsome face sobering to sadness.

"It was bad news," Serrell said. "But not surprisin', Pen."

"And you're still goin' to try it, Tom?"

"Sure!" said Archinal with disgust. "He ain't got the sense of a jackass rabbit, Penny. And I can't talk none of my wisdom into him neither."

"Maybe he's right, Arch," said Penrose. "Somebody's got to break this damn business up some way."

"Might do it," Archinal assented, "if he'd deal us in, Penny."

"It's a free country," grinned Penrose. "We can set in if we want to."

"Not this time, Pen," said Serrell gently.

Penrose, slightly younger than Serrell, was slim and graceful, boyish and debonair, with curly black hair tousled above a fine-featured face, blue eyes that were bright and merry, a smiling mouth and a cleft chin. Happy-go-lucky and pleasure-loving, Penrose seemed a great deal younger than he was, even with the shade of Rumrill's death upon him. Extraordinary luck with cards and dice had prompted Penrose to give up mining for the tables of the Casino, but he remained closer to his prospector friends than to the gamblers.

"You're stayin' overnight in town, Tom?" he suggested. "That's fine, we can have a little farewell party then."

"Very little," Serrell said. "I want a clear head tomorrow."

"I'd like to go with you, Tom," said Penrose seriously.

"Why, kid? You're doin' all right here."

"Ought to quit before my luck runs out."

"You won't," predicted Archinal. "You'll be back out here, broke and diggin' again, by spring."

Penrose's grin was cheerful. "That's possible, Arch. But I'm about fifteen thousand dollars ahead right now."

"Tripled my take," Serrell said without resentment. "And had a lot of fun doin' it."

"Yeah, but Penny's fifteen is just borrowed from the Casino," Archinal pointed out. "It's all got to go back there. What you dug out of the dirt, Tom, really belongs to you."

"For how long, I wonder?" mused Serrell.

"It begins to look like the gold from Boulder Gulch'll never do anybody any good—but the outlaws,"

Penrose said, sounding unduly morbid for him.

"That's what we're goin' to try and change some," Tom Serrell said.

Old Archinal's gray beard bristled as his bony jaws jutted. "A one-man crew of vigilantes," scoffed the veteran. "He wants to die a hero. He thinks they'll put up a solid gold monument to him in front of the Prospect House!"

Serrell smiled gravely at him. "Liquor makes your tongue mighty sharp and bitter, Arch."

"He's probably had enough, Tom," laughed Penrose. "We'd better drink the rest of it ourselves."

"Sure, sure, go right ahead," Archinal said in mock anger. "All I did was pay for the damn stuff!"

CHAPTER II

Dance-Hall Fracas

TOM SERRELL saddled his bay gelding and loaded on the gear, in the shed built onto the rear of the cabin. The horse, tired of long standing in the cold, was eager and spirited. The big man stepped into the leather and left the log hut with little regret. It had been his legacy from Peter Dodd, one of the first of the Boulder miners to be killed and robbed as he tried to pull out with his savings, a lonely cheerless place for a dog-tired man to sink into the stupor of sleep each night. Except on the infrequent occasions when friends gathered there to drink, talk and play cards.

Those were the evenings Serrell would remember with pleasure, the rough faces, casual voices and easy laughter in the smoky lamplight. He thought with a sudden new and deeper pang of Rumrill, the latest victim of the killers, who had been heading home to his widowed mother, his wife and three children back in Ohio.

Rumrill had toiled and saved through two hard barren years in the Gulch, to build up a substantial stake for the folks at home. Rumrill with his square stolid pleasant face, sincere and friendly and kind. . . .

Anger blazed redly up through Tom Serrell, and hatred boiled in his brain. This vile murderous business had been going on altogether too long. He was going to put a stop to it, or die in the attempt. The need for action and reprisal had been growing in him for months, starting with the death of Dodd, climaxed by the shooting of Rumrill. It was too strong and bitter to be restrained any further.

December dusk was settling early as Tom Serrell took the down-canyon trail toward the town of Boulder Gulch, the scattered lamps of prospectors winking through the snowfall on either side. There were snug log houses like the one he had left; there were board shacks, flimsy shanties, sod huts, and tents banked with earth and pine boughs. The men of Boulder scratched diligently for their dust, and lived a poor animal existence while collecting it. This was not one of the fabulous get-rich-quick camps, where miners became wealthy overnight. The first rich strikes of Boulder had long since played out.

The lights of the settlement glowed ahead, blurred into a soft golden radiance by the veiling snow, and Serrell recalled the recent passing of Christmas, the coming of New Year's, a solid week of drunkenness for many of the lonely fortune-hunters of the Gulch.

It had been a considerable span of years since the holidays had meant anything to Tom Serrell. The memory of childhood Christmases was painful now, for his parents were dead, his brother had died at the little log church of Shiloh in the first year of the war, and his sister had

married and disappeared with a rapscallion husband.

One other Christmas stood out, the only one he had shared with Laurel, his wife, lost that next spring in childbirth, the baby boy stillborn. . . . *Everybody I like dies,* Serrell thought with more wonder than complaint. *A curse comes on the people I love. Everything that matters is soon lost to me. . . . Strange stars indeed that shaped the Serrell destiny.*

In town the snow slackened as darkness came, and overhead the stars shone with a steely glitter, the moon was a silver blade, tilted above the snowy bulk of the Bitterroot Hills. The main street was thronged with men, horses and wagons, the whiteness underfoot trampled into slush and mud, the places of amusement blazing with light and roaring with bawdy life, drunken voices and laughter swelling through the tinny jangle of music.

Tom Serrell turned into the arch of Solberg's Stable, left the bay gelding there, and returned to the street. Standing on the damp boardwalk, he filled and lighted his pipe, exchanging quiet greetings with passing acquaintances. Everybody was talking about Rumrill, but the voices dropped and trailed off, as Serrell was recognized. Nerves were on edge in Boulder, with every man's suspicion sharpened, wondering if his neighbor could be one of the road agents. Even intoxicated, most of the miners maintained watchful eyes and guarded tongues, their hands close to the guns carried in waistbands, pockets or holsters.

Steve Kellett came along and halted at Serrell's side, tall, thin and ramrod straight, a man of quiet authority and distinction, a leader throughout the Gulch. Ever since Dodd's death, Kellett had been trying to organize a force of vigilantes to put down the crime wave. He said: "I thought this last one might do it, Tom. Everybody liked Rumrill. But I guess nothing will ever bring these people together."

"Afraid not, Steve."

"You going to hit for Glendale? It's a poor gamble, Tom."

Tom Serrell's broad shoulders lifted a trifle. "I can't sit back any more."

"Why don't you let some of us cover you?" asked Kellett.

"They wouldn't bite. They're too smart, Steve. They know every move before it's made."

"Well, I hate to see you go, Tom."

Serrell smiled soberly. "Time to travel before I start growin' roots. I'll see you before I pull out, Steve." Holding another match to his pipe, he watched Kellett walk away with calm dignity, a man of intelligence and understanding. *Like to tell Steve,* thought Serrell. *But I can't confide in anybody. It'll never work, if I do. . . . Uncanny, the way that outlaw ring gets its information.*

CROSSING toward the Casino, Tom Serrell saw Sheriff Bratney watching him from the opposite sidewalk, a small pompous pouter-pigeon of a man, swollen with the importance of an office that was little more than a joke in Boulder. Swerving and striding straight toward him, Serrell observed the contraction of the sheriff's plump cheeks, the nervous compression of the flabby mouth. Bratney nodded his head at the gambling hall.

"Don't go lookin' for trouble in there, Serrell."

"I never look for it, Brat," drawled Serrell, towering above the little lawman.

"You thought a lot of Rumrill."

"That's right, a fine boy. How you comin' on that case, Brat?" Serrell's tone was gently jeering.

"Nothin' to work on," Bratney said. "No more clues than there ever was."

"Ever play hunches?" inquired Serrell.

Sheriff Bratney drew himself up even more. "A man in my position can't afford to risk hunches."

Tom Serrell laughed softly and went on toward the ornamental batwing doors of the Casino, constantly flapping with the noisy traffic of rough-garbed holiday-minded men. Del Chalfant, the proprietor, leaning in careless elegance on the mahogany bar, turned with his suave smile of greeting for Serrell. A tall graceful figure in a flawlessly cut gray plaid suit, Chalfant had wavy brown hair, brilliant liquid-brown eyes, carved aristocratic features, the courteous manner of a true gentleman, perfect poise and assurance.

"Have a drink with me, Tom," he invited, pouring from the bottle at hand.

"Thanks, I will," Serrell said, surprised as always by the winning charm of this man who was, without doubt, thoroughly ruthless and unscrupulous, and quite possibly the instigator of this reign of terror in Boulder Gulch, which had taken the lives and the gold of so many good men.

As he relished the smooth flavor and quality of Chalfant's favorite whiskey, Tom Serrell surveyed the saloon and adjacent game room. Paul Mesereau presided over the faro layout, a slight neat man in black broadcloth, pale and dead-faced, cold-eyed and emotionless, the ace gambler of the establishment.

Skip Schepis, Chalfant's private gunman, stood by the board, stocky and compact, sinewy and coordinated, two guns holstered on his thighs. Schepis was prematurely gray-haired, with bleached colorless eyes in a ruddy rock-like face, and Serrell caught the flicker of those eyes as he lounged there savoring his drink. Hack Gronauer, the strong-armed giant of the Casino, was not in sight.

"Too bad about Rumrill," said Chalfant.

Serrell's blond head nodded an inch or so.

"Are you going to the New Year's ball, Tom?"

"Don't expect to be here, Del."

"You aren't going to try and get out?" Chalfant's surprise and consternation seemed genuine.

"Just to Glendale."

"Not a very healthy route."

Serrell's shrug was barely perceptible. "A drink on me, Del?"

"No, I'm buying," Chalfant insisted, refilling the glasses. "Perhaps your trip explains Alice Witherill's consent to attend the ball with me, Tom?"

"Not at all," Serrell said indifferently. "She doesn't know I'm goin', yet."

"Your interest is declining?"

"Declined," said Tom Serrell. "Some time ago. Now, if you'll let me pour—"

Del Chalfant smiled and shook his well-groomed brown curls. "Not on what might be your last visit, Tom. Permit me, please."

"No more, thanks," Serrell said. "I'll see you again, Del."

"I hope so, Tom," said Chalfant. They parted, smiling easily, revealing none of the instinctive mutual hatred that had been between them from their first meeting.

TOM SERRELL went outside and along the slat walk, climbing the wet gritty steps into the Bonanza Ballroom, with its blaring music and desperate drunken hilarity, the shuffle and stomp of boots, the false bright gayety of the dance-hall girls. Tess Tremblay sat on her high stool at the far end of the bar, good-naturedly telling an eager group of miners that she had retired from active service on the floor.

"I own the joint, gents," laughed Tess. "Why should I go on gettin'

crippled for a dollar a dance? There are plenty of girls for you, younger and prettier. . . . Let an old lady rest and dream."

The men gallantly protested that Tess was the youngest, most beautiful and best of all, but she shooed them away, as Serrell watched smilingly. Then she saw him and her dark red head went up, her green eyes flashing, her handsome face lighting with interest. He came to a stand beside her, sharply aware of her fragrant vivid nearness, the full-blown curves of her splendid body.

"I owe you a dance, Tom," said Tess Tremblay.

"Not tonight, Tess."

"Life," she sighed ironically. "Everybody wants to dance with me, except the one I want to dance with. Settle for a drink, then." She signaled the nearest bartender.

Drink in hand, Tom Serrell rested comfortably back on the bar, and Tess slid lithely from the stool to stand close beside him, compassion in her green eyes as she thought of Rumrill, knowing that it was on Serrell's mind.

"That poor boy," she murmured. "And those people waitin' in Ohio. How long can things like that go on here, Tom?"

"Not much longer, I hope."

"What are you goin' to do?"

"I'm ridin' to Glendale, Tess. But I'll be back."

"Oh, no!" she cried softly, pain and fear shading her eyes and her keen features. "You'll never get there, Tom. And you won't be comin' back either."

He laughed with light reproval. "You haven't got much faith in me, woman."

"What can one man alone do against that wolf pack? Even a man like you, Tom."

"We'll find out maybe," Serrell said.

A shadow fell across them and Hack Gronauer was there, half-drunk, sullen and ugly, looming high and large, massive and burly, a brute-faced giant ignoring Serrell, his eyes gleaming hungrily on Tess Tremblay. "My dance, Tess," he said. "And you ain't herdin' me off like you did them others. Come on out here."

"I'm not dancin' tonight, Hack," she said calmly. "Keep your hands off me."

"You are dancin'," he growled, grasping at her bare arm.

Tom Serrell came off the bar and shouldered into the big man, slicing the edge of his palm down on Gronauer's thick wrist, driving the groping hand down and away. "You heard the lady, Hack," he said.

"Lady?" said Gronauer with heavy mockery, wheeling on Serrell as if noticing him for the first time. "You want to get busted up, brother? If you don't, drag your frame outa here!"

"What you celebratin', Hack?" inquired Serrell. "Every time somebody gets killed around here, you get drunk."

"Meanin' what, miner?" Gronauer snarled.

"I don't know, Hack. That's what I'm askin' you."

"You want an answer? Here you are, bucko!"

Hack Gronauer swung suddenly at Serrell's face, but Tom ducked under the mighty sweeping blow, flung whiskey from the glass in his left hand, and struck savagely with his right fist. Gronauer stumbled back, blinded and gasping, his shaggy head rocking under that whipping impact.

Recovering balance Gronauer kicked out wickedly with his right leg. Slipping sideways, Serrell caught that heavy booted leg and lifted it high. Gronauer landed flat on his back with a jarring crash, lashing out with both heels to drive Serrell away.

Housemen moved in to stop it, but

Tess Tremblay gestured and spoke clearly: "Let 'em go, boys. Hack asked for it." A crowd gathered instantly, and someone said, "Put the boots to him, Tom. That's the way he fights." Serrell shook his fair head and waited for his opponent to scramble upright.

GRONAUER came in a great flailing rush, beating Serrell's arms down, jolting and smashing at his face and head. The giant's weight and momentum carried Serrell back.

A tremendous clout almost unhinged his neck, and Serrell fell backward as lights burst and flared in his skull from the shocking concussion. The bar slammed him across the shoulders, beating the breath from his lungs. Serrell hung there, blood filling his mouth, explosions rocketing in his head, and Hack Gronauer charged snarling in to finish him.

With a supreme effort, Tom Serrell summoned strength into his long legs and arms, threw himself forward at the incoming Gronauer, overconfident and wide open now. Driving inside those widespread arms, Serrell slashed away left and right, pouring his whole rangy body into the punches. Gronauer stiffened up straight and tottered back, his head bobbing as those flashing fists ripped and tore at him.

Crouched and weaving, Serrell went after him, drilling at the bulge of Gronauer's waistline now, sinking both hands to the wrist. The air left Hack's body with a long grunting groan, his mouth gaped wide as he doubled up, pawing the lamplight helplessly. Serrell straightened him with a spearing left, and let his right go with all he had behind it.

The solid smash rang through the smoke-layered hush of tension. Gronauer's big head sprung back as the bull neck snapped. He was falling when Serrell clubbed him once more, beating his head and shoulders into the hardwood floor. Gronauer's bulk slid ten feet on the polished surface, spilling tables and chairs with a splintering crash of glassware.

It didn't seem possible that any man would get up after that, but Hack Gronauer did, clambering groggily to his feet and searching blindly for Serrell, blood pouring from his ruined face in a dark flood, drenching his chest and shoulders.

"That's enough, Hack," said Tom Serrell, his hands aching from the raw knuckles up into his numbed forearms.

"Like hell, you—!" panted Gronauer, clawing at the holster on his right leg.

The gun came out of the leather, but it didn't come up because Serrell's Colt was already drawn, cocked and leveled firmly. "Drop it, Hack," said Tom with quiet emphasis.

With a strange animal sound in his throat, Gronauer started to swing the gun up. Tom Serrell lined his .44 on that right arm and fired, the flame leaping and bellowing through the packed room, the Colt kicking up in Tom's hand. Gronauer's gun clattered to the floor as the slug shattered his arm and turned him half around.

With a terrible roar, Hack Gronauer came forward like a maddened bull-buffalo, his great left arm outstretched. Serrell stepped inside that gorilla-like arm and chopped down with his gun barrel. Gronauer bowed under the steel, his knees sagging, and toppled ponderously, face and chest against the floorboards. Tom Serrell turned and walked back to the bar, where a grinning bartender had a drink ready for him.

"Take his gun and lug him to the doctor's," Tess Tremblay said coolly. "And don't let him back in here again, boys." She followed Serrell to the bar, the music started up again, and the dance went on as if nothing had happened.

"Should of finished him," Serrell said, talking to himself more than to anyone else. "He's probably one of them. Maybe the one who got Rumrill and old Pete Dodd. And tried for me today."

"He won't be gettin' anybody else for quite awhile, Tom," said Tess Tremblay.

"Foolish to show any mercy," Serrell said, "in a matter like this. Well, I've got to be goin', Tess."

She walked to the door with him, stepped outside with him into the cold snowy night. They stood on the steps a moment, staring at the frosty sparkle of the stars, the pure white crescent of the moon.

"I guess you know, Tom, how I feel about you," Tess said.

"It helps, Tess," Serrell told her.

"It doesn't mean a thing to you, Tom," she said, almost fiercely. "But you aren't to blame for that. . . . You might kiss me—for luck."

Tom Serrell bent and tasted the full ripe sweetness of her red mouth, and Tess Tremblay's arms clutched at him, then dropped away.

"I'll be seein' you, Tess."

"Sure, Tom," she whispered, with a catch in her throat. "Take care of yourself, boy."

He strode away, spitting blood from time to time, the night air stinging his scraped knuckles and the abrasions of his face. Tess watched until he was out of view. Shuddering then, with something deeper than the December cold, she went back into the smoky raucous din of her dance-hall.

CHAPTER III

Volunteer for Boothill

WITHERILL'S General Store was crowded as usual, customers and idlers ranging before the long merchandise-heaped counters, harried and overwrought clerks trying to maintain the cheerful politeness that Harvey Witherill demanded of his employees. The office was partitioned off in a rear corner, above floor level with a broad window overlooking the whole interior. There in view of everyone, Witherill sat working at his desk, the enormous safe occupying the entire wall at his back. The bank of Boulder Gulch.

Tom Serrell, having washed the blood from his bruised face at an ice-crusted horse trough, walked through this large market toward the office, nodding to people here and there. Witherill looked up at his knock on the glass-topped door, smiled in his cool friendly fashion and motioned Serrell to enter. Harvey Witherill, the most respected business man in Boulder, was medium-sized, solid and dependable, distinguished-looking with a graying crest of hair above a sober lined face that was both handsome and strong, kindly yet hard. A highly esteemed man of power and influence.

"Hello, Tom," he greeted in a deep cultured voice. "What can I do for you, my boy?"

"Bring my dust to the Prospect House when you close up, Harv."

"Why, certainly," said Witherill. "But I hope you aren't going to try carrying it out of here, Tom."

"Got to be done sometime, and I'm about ready to move on."

"This is a bad time, Tom."

"And not likely to get any better," Serrell said.

"I'm sorry to hear this, Tom," said Witherill. "Alice and I had hoped you would stay the winter, at least. There aren't too many of our kind of people in the Gulch, you know."

"Thanks, Harv, but I'm just a drifter myself," Serrell said. "You'll be closin' about nine?"

"Nine-thirty, I think, tonight," Witherill said, a shade less friendly. "I'll see you at the hotel then."

Tom Serrell nodded, turned, and went out, wondering what there was about Harvey Witherill that he couldn't quite like. Perhaps it was the man's success he resented, or his absolute composure and confidence. Maybe it was that haughty streak in Witherill, not often exposed but always there. Heading for the front door, Serrell wondered which man, or men, in this assemblage would hasten to report his visit to the bandits, to Del Chalfant or whoever was the leader.

The Prospect House, the best hotel in town, was also owned by Harvey Witherill, and operated by his daughter Alice. At the lobby desk Serrell signed the register, requested a room he had occupied before, and received his key from the clerk, a sleek dapper young man named Vaiden, pomaded, mustached and supercilious in attitude.

SEEING a light in the manager's office, Serrell rapped on the panel and entered at the girl's invitation. Rising to meet him, Alice Witherill was rather tall for a woman, with a serene stately grace, her burnished dark head high and imperious, her dark eyes calm and knowing in that queenly face, her mouth soft and sensuous in contrast to her appearance in general.

"Fighting again, Tom," she chided, scanning his rough marked features. "Isn't that carrying gallantry too far, to defend the honor of a dance-hall proprietress? I'm sure Tess is capable of taking care of herself."

"Gronauer's a bit bigger," Serrell said, unruffled. "And Tess Tremblay isn't the toughest woman in the world, regardless of your opinion."

"You always take her part against me," complained Alice Witherill. "Perhaps she's more your type, Tom."

"Maybe," he smiled. "Or maybe she needs help more than you do."

Alice gestured impatiently. "Let's not quarrel, Tom. I've seen so little of you lately. I finally gave up waiting for you to ask me to the New Year's dance."

"So I hear. Chalfant told me you had honored him."

"Why didn't you hit *him*, then?"

"What for?" protested Serrell.

"You'd like to well enough," Alice Witherill said. "You hate him, and Del hates you, but you're always nice and polite to one another." Her tone became taunting: "Afraid of him, Tom?"

"I don't think so, Alice."

"Oh, I know," she said. "You aren't afraid of anybody or anything. You're Tom Serrell against the world, no odds asked or given. . . ." Her manner changed abruptly, and she swayed closer to him. "What are you doing tonight, Tom?"

"Gettin' ready to ride out—to Glendale," he told her. "Your father's bringin' my dust over here. I want you to keep it for me, Alice, and don't mention it to anyone. Not even your dad."

"You fool!" she cried, her voice harsh with emotion. "What are you trying to commit suicide for? Will that help Rumrill or Baker or Pete Dodd? Or any of the dead, or the living either?"

"It's my life, Alice."

"Yes, throw it away," she said in duller accents. "I guess it's no good to anybody but yourself, Tom. You won't let anyone else into it at all."

"You'll keep the gold?"

"Yes, I'll keep it," Alice Witherill said. "But you'd better leave your will with it, Tom."

"Steve Kellett has that," Serrell said.

"I suppose the Bonanza benefits richly from it?"

Tom Serrell smiled gravely. "Not altogether, Alice. I remembered all my friends."

She pressed still closer, gripping

his arms, staring intensely up into his rugged tanned face. "They'll kill you, Tom! Whether you're carrying any gold or not. Don't try it, Tom, please don't!"

"I've got to, Alice," he said gently.

"They'll kill you," she moaned.

"They'll try to."

"They haven't missed yet, Tom."

"There's always a first time," Serrell said simply. "I've got to see to a few things now, Alice. I'll be back to meet your father."

"All right, Tom." She released his arms and stepped back, her face unhappy and petulant, the dark eyes stormy, the lips losing their soft fullness. A proud willful girl, not used to being denied her own way, and not liking it in the least.

In the lobby, Serrell found old Archinal and young Penrose, and immediately asked them up to his room, stepping into the hotel barroom to buy a bottle of whiskey and a deck of cards, speaking of the pleasure of before-supper drinks over a few hands of poker. The room was at the rear of the second floor, one window opening onto the gallery that ran across the back end of the building.

Leaving Arch and Penny to the whiskey and cards, Tom Serrell slipped through the window onto the dark deserted porch, climbed the railing, slid down the corner post, and dropped into the empty backyard. Crossing through other snowy rubbish-littered rear areas to Solberg's, he returned shortly leading his horse, and left the bay with detailed instructions to the hostler in the hotel stable. Benjay, a small hunchbacked wrangler with a great love for horses and a vast contempt for most of mankind, was strangely devoted to Serrell, and in this crisis Tom trusted him without hesitation or reserve.

Back at the rear corner of the Prospect House, Serrell shinnied up the post to the second-story veranda, swung over the rail, and reentered the window to his room, where Penrose and Archinal were nursing drinks and cutting cards for absurdly prodigious sums.

After another round, they went out to eat a late supper in the Imperial Restaurant. At the conclusion of the meal it was time for Serrell to go back to the hotel and meet Harv Witherill.

"I'm turnin' in early, boys," Serrell said. "If you're around in the mornin', I'll see you before I take off probably."

Archinal and Penrose were reluctant and suspicious about letting him go, but there wasn't much they could do. Parting casually, they wandered toward the Casino while Serrell strolled in the direction of the Prospect House. A thin light snow was falling in the lamplit darkness, but the wind had subsided, the night wasn't too raw or cold.

TWO hours later Tom Serrell was alone in Room Seventeen having dropped discreet words here and there to the effect that he would take the Rim Road, when he set out for Glendale. It was a way little traveled since the outbreak of killings in the territory, for it was open and exposed along the barren rimrock, a sheer rock wall falling almost vertically away on the south, making retreat impossible. On the other hand there was but sparse cover for an ambush, while the Canyon Trail offered endless opportunities for bushwhackers to strike.

Serrell had received his gold dust from Harvey Witherill, ostensibly to pack out with him, but it now reposed in a secret wall-safe in Alice Witherill's office. If the road agents got Serrell, they would acquire only about four hundred dollars. But there was small consolation in that, for a man facing death.

He passed another hour in the

room, smoking, thinking, and taking occasional nips of whiskey. By this time the town at large was either drunk or asleep. There was night-long activity in places, of course, but it dwindled after twelve-thirty or so. . . . Serrell blew out the lamp, made appropriate sounds for a man retiring, and arranged the bedding to look as if someone were sleeping in the blankets. He waited a half-hour longer, and nobody came near; nothing happened.

For the second time, Serrell crawled out through the window and clambered down from the gallery to the ground. Benjay was waiting in the darkened stable, with the bay gelding saddled and ready. "I did what you said, Tom," whispered the hunchback. "Cached it where you said. It looks like the real thing, too."

"Thanks, Benny," said Serrell pressing a pouch into the hostler's hand. "Buy a drink in the Casino, and let out that I've started."

"That I don't like, Tom," muttered Benjay. "Puttin' them killers onto you."

"That's what I want though, Benny," said Serrell. "They'd probably be on me anyway, but we've got to make sure."

"You be mighty careful, Tom," Benjay said, as Serrell mounted and rode out into the snow-swirling darkness.

Tom Serrell took a roundabout back way out of the settlement, crossing a ridge and sliding down into the Rim Road west of town. Glendale and the stage line lay sixty miles westward from Boulder Gulch. Serrell had scouted this end of the trail thoroughly, laid his plans carefully, and all he needed now was a little luck—or perhaps a lot of it would be better. There was only one good spot for an ambuscade in the first fifteen miles, and the other victims had fallen within five or ten miles of Boulder. It was safer to kill here than in Glendale, where they had some real law officers instead of a no-account like Bratney.

It was lonely in the night, with the Gulch behind him, the snow whispering down on the wilderness, and wolves howling mournfully in the timber. The moon was obscured, limning the passing clouds with pale fire, but a few steel-pointed stars pricked through in places. The air was clean and cold, but not biting or freezing, with no wind to tear through clothing and flesh.

Tom Serrell rode easily, loose and relaxed in the leather, letting the bay pick his own pace through the snow and muck. He was used to riding alone, accustomed to danger, and he did not dislike either. His senses were sharpened, his blood tingling, and he felt fully and keenly alive in the winter night. It occurred to him that he wanted to stay this way, alive; had to, in fact, if anyone was to benefit from this mission.

Five miles out, the road emerged on the rimrock, a cliff dropping steeply on his left, open country rolling away to the right, timber dark and ragged in the distant background. A naked defenseless feeling came to Tom Serrell, unpleasant and wearing on the nerves, and for a moment he wondered why he was doing this. . . . Why hadn't he just taken his gold and made the break for himself, bent only on getting out alive with his dust? Then he knew he was doing it this way because he had to, or somebody had to, and the finger of fate seemed to be on him.

Smiling somberly, his mind settled and clear, he rode steadily on along the clifftop in the soft slanting snow.

IN THE grove of alders, Tom Serrell dismounted beside a clump of boulders to search for the object Benjay had planted there for him. A dummy, so much like a man's body that Serrell started slightly when he

first saw it lying there. A stuffed burlap body in a heavy jacket, the sleeves padded into arms, a hat fastened on the knobby head, tarpaulins rolled into the legs of old pants, hitched to the bransack torso. The whole thing fixed carefully and securely together, braced on a wooden cross that formed backbone and shoulders. It would do, Serrell thought, it would look enough like a man at a distance in the snow-curtained darkness.

Placing the scarecrow figure astride of the saddle, Tom Serrell adjusted it with scrupulous care, tying the legs to the stirrups with light cord, the arms to the pommel on which the reins were wrapped slackly. It wouldn't fool anybody up close, of course, but it would be all right at rifle range in the murky light of night. Then he knotted a long stout rawhide about the dummy, under the heavy stuffed sleeves.

Ahead was the ideal spot for an ambush, the cover provided by a cedar-wooded ridge on the north. *But I'm going to feel awful foolish,* he thought wryly, *if nothing happens. If they aren't here, waiting to shoot me down.* Something told him with chilling certainty, however, that they were on that ridge with their rifles ready.

The road ran very close to the edge of the precipice, west of the alders, and about five feet below the rim was a ledge on which a man could walk with relative ease and safety, if it didn't bother him too much to be on the brink of a six-hundred-foot chasm. Serrell had studied the layout thoroughly, knew every inch of that shelf and all the hiding places in under the overhanging rimrock.

Leading the horse to the outer fringe of alders, the rawhide in his hand, Serrell went to the clifftop, lowered himself cautiously to the ledge, spoke to the bay and moved forward. The well-trained gelding stepped into the open road at a slow walk, the dummy drooping in the saddle, and Serrell kept pace at the rim, the stone snow-patched and treacherous under his boots, hoping they wouldn't wait too long before they opened fire.

They didn't. The whine of bullets came to him, the stuffed figure lurched as lead tore through it and flame stabbed from the northern ridge, the reports crashing and booming, echoing in the snowy darkness.

With a strong tug, Serrell yanked the dummy loose and hauled it toward him, rolling and threshing on the ground. The bay danced and pitched skittishly, but stayed between him and the marksmen. Serrell uttered a short scream and hurled the dummy over the cliff, thong and all, seeking a hole for himself beneath the protruding rim.

Horses were coming on the run now, their hoofbeats muffled and swishing in the snow, and Serrell burrowed deep in under the overthrust rock, gun in hand, relying on his ears for everything. The hoofs drummed closer, stomped around almost overhead, and leather creaked as the riders swung down. They were peering over the edge, grumbling and cursing until one man said:

"What the hell? His gold'll be in the packroll. He couldn't carry much on him."

Serrell knew that voice. It belonged unmistakably to Skip Schepis.

"That's right, Skip," said another man, low and toneless. "Saved them the trouble of buryin' him in Boulder. Serrell's got the whole Lower Basin for a grave."

Serrell identified this speaker, too. Paul Mesereau, the gambler. *So it was Del Chalfant and his outfit, beyond any further doubt. But there was somebody else, someone would catch hell for sending them on this wild-goose chase tonight.* For Serrell

could hear them swearing and raging, as they ripped open his bedroll and saddlebags, and found no gold dust pouches, nothing of value. They were threatening somebody, reviling whoever it was for pulling a double-cross.

There were other voices, two at least, that Serrell couldn't place. But it didn't matter, for the presence of Schepis and Mesereau tagged the crew, and Hack Gronauer would have been along if he wasn't wounded and beaten up.

An argument ensued when one of them wanted to shoot Serrell's horse, and Schepis's voice rasped in cold anger:

"Don't be a damn fool! Leave that horse alone, and put the saddlebags and blanketroll back on him. Let him drift back into the Gulch alone. We'll be surprised as any of them to know Serrell's gone."

Tom Serrell waited under the rim for some time after the sounds of their departure had faded in the night. Climbing out and up to the top then, he saw that they had started the bay back toward town, but he had halted and was waiting this side of the alders. Serrell strode after him, swinging his arms and legs to ease the cramped cold and set the choked-off blood to circulating freely.

He patted the gelding's neck and stepped into the saddle. It was rather a strange experience to see yourself shot, and hear yourself talked of as dead. He smiled grimly in the dank shadow of the silent and snow-shrouded trees.

"Good boy," he said to the horse. "We'll give them plenty of time to get back and spread the word. Then we'll see who they go after for double-dealin' them tonight. And we'll do a little checkin' of our own, somewhere along the line, maybe turn up a few things nobody around Boulder Gulch ever figured about."

CHAPTER IV

Showdown in Colt Cash

BOULDER GULCH was much quieter, Serrell found on his return. From back alleys and lots, he glimpsed lamps still burning in the Casino, the Bonanza, and a few saloons, but there was no noise or hilarity at this late hour, nobody moving on the street. He stabled the gelding behind the Prospect House, unsaddling this time because he was sure that the end would come right here in town, and before daybreak.

The hotel was in darkness as Serrell once more mounted the rear porch and climbed the post to the second-floor gallery, thinking that he was becoming quite a porch-climber tonight. Snow was still hissing downward in the dark. He entered through the window, and was not surprised to find his bed disarranged from the way he had left it.

Disregarding the lamp, he shaped and lit a cigarette in the dimness, found the whiskey bottle and poured a liberal drink, taking it in slow thoughtful draughts, appreciative of the spreading warmth inside him. Draining the glass finally, Serrell unlocked the door and stepped warily into the faint light of the corridor.

The Witherills occupied a suite at the front of the second floor, but no lights showed under any of the doors. Tom Serrell loosened the gun in its sheath, and crept stealthily down the stairway into the lobby. A low-turned night lamp glowed dully on the desk, leaving most of the room in deep shadows. There was no one in sight, but the office door was outlined in light.

Serrell's pulse quickened, and he swallowed to ease the taut dryness of his throat. Something that he had vaguely suspected, without any real basis or reason, was about to be established as the truth. Dim disap-

pointment and regret touched him briefly, and was seared away in a white-hot flood of fury. Somebody was in there assaying his gold dust. He knew it as well as if his vision penetrated that wall. Either Alice or her father, or some outsider who was in league with them.

Reaching the ground floor, Serrell drew back into the darkness of the dining room and hesitated there, his heart hammering and his breath coming fast. He dreaded going to open that office door. There was no mercy in him now, but there was a strained painful reluctance.

For the first time tonight he wished there was somebody with him; this was a part he did not want to play alone. Taking off his outer jacket, Serrell draped it over the nearest chair and tried the gun in its holster again. His head felt hot and he laid his battered hat softly down on a table.

As if in answer to his wish, boots sounded lightly on the front veranda, the door opened softly, and Del Chalfant came in. He was still bareheaded, wearing only the gray plaid suit, the coat open now, the skirts pulled back to clear the ivory-handled guns strapped on his hips. After peering all about, Chalfant paced toward the rectangle of thin light that marked the office door, moving with catlike ease and grace, quiet, calm and deadly.

Chalfant was twenty feet away when that door opened. Harvey Witherill stepped out, immaculate and composed as ever, closing the door behind him and smiling at the other man.

"Why, hello, Del. Is there anything wrong?"

Chalfant was equally poised and cool. "I don't know, Harv. I was just coming to inquire."

"What about?" Witherill asked indifferently. "Would you like a drink, Del?" He started to walk away, but Chalfant stopped him with a raised hand.

"Let's have it in the office, Harvey," said Del Chalfant still very smoothly.

"Rather not, if you don't mind. I'm going over some personal things in there, Del."

"Partners shouldn't have secrets from one another."

Witherill laughed easily. "Every man's entitled to some private life. About that drink, Del . . ."

"I'm not thirsty, Harv," said Chalfant. "I'm curious."

"More specifically?" Witherill said, his voice a bit crisper.

"About some gold—that used to be Tom Serrell's."

"What are you talking about?" demanded Witherill. "Didn't your boys get Serrell tonight?"

"Yes," Chalfant said. "But they didn't get any of his gold."

"Well, I can't help that, Del. I turned it over to him."

"If he didn't take it with him, he must have left it here, somewhere. Let's look around Alice's office, Harv." Chalfant moved slightly toward the door.

Witherill sprang back in front of him. "Hold on, Del, you're going too far! This is my place, and I don't like your insinuations."

"All right, I won't insinuate any more," Chalfant said. "I'll speak plainly, Harv. *I want that dust of Serrell's!*"

"You're insane, man!" protested Witherill. Then he threw out his left arm in a gesture of pure panic. "*Look there, Del!*"

Chalfant was nearly fooled, but not quite. His curly brown head started to turn, snapped instantly back to the front, and his right arm whipped as Witherill's right hand snaked for his left armpit. The older man never had a chance. He had barely grasped the gun in the shoulder-holster, when Chalfant's Colt burst into roaring

flame, beating Witherill back against the wall.

He leaned there, crumpled and shrinking, his distinguished gray head turning from side to side as his body writhed on the wall. Cold and deliberate, Del Chalfant shot him through the body again, and once more. Harvey Witherill doubled convulsively, bloody hands pressed in frenzy to his riddled body, and pitched forward at Chalfant's feet, twitching a moment, going rigid and then limp, motionless and lifeless in a dark glistening pool.

CHALFANT laughed and sheathed his smoking gun, stepped over the dead body and flung open the office door. "Ah, just as I thought," he said with quiet amusement. "Serrell's gold dust right on the desk." He laughed again, with louder satisfaction.

"And it's still mine, Del," said Tom Serrell, striding out of the dining room darkness into the low flickering lamplight of the lobby.

Chalfant spun from the doorway and stared in utter stricken amazement at this big blond man suddenly risen from the dead. But Chalfant cast off the numbing shock, quicker than most men could have, and it was Serrell's turn to be astonished at this incredible recovery.

"How many lives have you got, Tom?" asked Del Chalfant, sauntering gracefully toward him in the gloom, smiling with all his characteristic charm, hands swaying close to the ivory-handled guns.

"Just one."

"Who was it went over the cliff into Lower Basin then?"

Serrell smiled thinly. "A friend, Del. A silent partner."

"Well, my boys'll be coming on the run," Chalfant remarked carelessly. "When guns start talking you can't keep them away. You won't have much of a chance, Tom."

"I'll take what there is, Del," said Tom Serrell. "Your boys like it better in the brush, four or five against one."

Chalfant's smile died, his chiseled face went bleak, and his eyes burned like dark liquid fire. "This has been a long time coming," he said, biting off the words distinctly, all the pent-up hatred leaping into his features.

"Let's get to it," Serrell said mildly, standing tall and rangy, long arms hanging loosely from the broad shoulders, lamplight touching his hatless head with streaks of flickering gold.

"A pleasure, Serrell."

Chalfant's right arm flashed into a gray blur as he leaped into a wide crouch. Serrell stood still and straight except for the smooth dip and rise of the big right hand, the slight bend of the knees. Serrell cocked the Colt as it cleared leather, thumbed the hammer forward again as the barrel swept level and lined. Fire blossomed brightly with a shattering sound, and the gun bucked hard in Serrell's big hand.

The swift shining arc of Chalfant's weapon was broken by the shocking smash of the slug against his chest. His hand jerked up beyond the parallel line, the gun flared at an upward angle. Lead fanned warmly over Serrell's blond head and ripped a lamp crashing from its wall-bracket. Chalfant staggered on splaying knees and tried once more, his arm suddenly heavy, the shot raking the lobby floorboards, furrowing up splinters.

Tom Serrell threw down and triggered, the blast jolting Chalfant into a backward reel. With a desperate effort, the dying man caught his balance for a second, but the curly head was sagging onto his blood-stained chest, the gun-hand was hanging straight down, slack and useless. With a small choked cry of anger and despair, scarlet spraying from his mouth, Chalfant buckled and lurched,

hit the floor and rolled, stretched into dead stillness.

Gunfire burst out in the street before the Prospect House, racketing back and forth in the December night, and Tom Serrell stood there listening intently, smoke curling in frail wisps from the .44 Colt in his hand.

A light tread sounded on the stairway at Serrell's back, and he whirled around to face this new menace. His Colt started up, then dropped again to a floorward tilt. His narrowed gray eyes were staring into the muzzle of a gun in Alice Witherill's hand. She was on the midway landing, her face like hard white marble under the black hair, completely cold and cruel.

"Father and Del—and now you, Tom," she said.

"The lovely Miss Witherill and her honorable father," Serrell said with soft scorn. "Partners of Chalfant and his murderin' crew."

"Who's going to believe that when you're dead, you fool?" sneered Alice.

Another voice cut in from the top of the stairs, clear and strident, but feminine: "He isn't goin' to be dead, lady. But *you* are, if you don't drop that gun!"

It was Tess Tremblay, poised calmly at the head of the stairway, a gun barrel pointed down at Alice's back. Flickering lamplight in the upper corridor tinged Tess's head with red-gold, and the shine of her eyes was green and merciless. Serrell lifted his gray glance, astounded and relieved at once, shaking his dusky blond head in wonder.

Alice Witherill twirled on the halfway landing, still holding her weapon, and Tess Tremblay fired a warning shot past her. Alice screamed and dropped the gun. Her pink robe shimmered and swirled as she wheeled again, her face ghastly and stricken, her long legs melting beneath her. Alice Witherill fell headlong on the stairs, tumbling like a large gaudy doll to the bottom, lying there unconscious. . . .

OUTSIDE in the night there had been a sudden rush of men from the Casino toward the Prospect House, when the shooting first broke out there. Old Archinal and young Penrose plunged out of the Lodestone Saloon, where they had been standing a long vigil, Arch with a sawed-off shotgun borrowed from the friendly bartender, Penny with his revolver drawn.

Skip Schepis, Paul Mesereau, and two other Casino gunmen were racing through the snow, heedless of everything but getting to the hotel.

"Hold it, boys!" shouted Archinal, planting his bowed legs and lining the shotgun.

A gun torched in reply, the bullet breaking window glass in the saloon, and Archinal turned loose with both barrels. A blinding sheet of flame illuminated the snowy street with a tremendous deafening roar, and two of the running men went down, tossed asprawl and all but torn in two by the buckshot at point-blank range, flopping like ragged bundles of clothing into the filthy muck of the gutter.

Paul Mesereau turned to fight, thin, dead-panned and emotionless as usual, pouring his fire at the two men in front of the Lodestone, while Skip Schepis fled on toward the Prospect House. With lead crackling all around him, splintering wood and glass at the rear, the slender wildly grinning Penrose stood firm and leveled off at the Casino gambler. Penrose's gun blazed and boomed in the darkness.

Mesereau stumbled back off the raised planks of the walk, sat down suddenly on a hitch-rail, keeled over backward into the slush and mire.

Other Chalfant crewmen had started to surge out of the ornate swing-doors of the Casino, but halted

and blundered back in confusion when Steve Kellett and three other men appeared before them, six-guns in either hand, faces grim and gauntly set.

"Back inside, boys," ordered Kellett. "And stay there!"

By this time other townsmen and miners were emerging hastily from houses, hotels and barracks, all groggy with sleep and some half-drunk, but every man armed and more or less ready for battle.

Sheriff Bratney rushed from his jailhouse quarters, and came storming and raging at Steve Kellett and his followers like a plump infuriated little bantam-rooster. Steve Kellett gun-whipped the sheriff to the ground, flat on his face in a mud puddle, and turned back at once to watching the Casino entrances. The mob at Steve's back was growing by the minute, already jabbering about hanging every man in the gambling hall.

SKIP SCHEPIS reached the Prospect House porch untouched, and crashed through the door into the lobby, a tough stocky figure with gun in hand. He stopped short on seeing Tom Serrell standing there, big and rangy and easy, the man who was supposed to be dead at the foot of a cliff.

Schepis froze with incredulous horror for a second, dimly aware of the three bodies, Witherill near the corner, Chalfant in midfloor, Alice at the bottom of the stairway. He was unable to believe Serrell's living presence, numb and locked in paralysis, shaking his prematurely gray head, his red-rock face stunned and blank, his bleached eyes staring, wide and pale.

Serrell's big right hand rose evenly, steel glinting in the faint lamplight, and fire spurted from it, leaping and thundering across the room. Schepis's gun exploded late and high as he rocked backward, and crystal fragments showered brilliantly from the huge chandelier on the ceiling. Bouncing from the wall, Skip Schepis trotted forward on jacking legs, sank to his knees with a groan, toppled face down on the floor, silvery head still wagging weakly in disbelief until all motion ceased.

Tess Tremblay descended the stairs and came to stand, quietly and staunchly at Serrell's side, her red head barely reaching his high wide shoulder. They were still there, silent in the reeking powder smoke of the lobby, when Archinal and Penrose came in, smiling in vast relief at finding those two together, on their feet and unhurt after all that shooting.

A volley slashed out in the snowy night, as Kellett's force opened fire on the outlaws penned in the Casino, and Tom Serrell smiled gravely. "I guess Steve's got his vigilantes, at last."

"You're a one-man army, ain't you?" growled old Archinal. "You're a ring-tailed heller from way back, Serrell!"

"And you're goin' to stay with us now, aren't you, Tom?" murmured Tess Tremblay, looking up at him with warm-lighted worship in her green eyes.

"Yes, Tess, I'll be stayin' a while," Tom Serrell said gently. "I found out that you were right, Arch. One man can't always cut it alone, no matter how big he is."

"A lesson you damn sure needed, boy," grumbled Archinal. Then, peering around the smoky shadowed room, he added in softer tones: "But if one man ever could do it, Tom, I reckon you're the one."

"Chalfant got Witherill," said Serrell. "And Tess took Alice off the back of my neck."

"So old Harv Witherill was the big he-wolf, after all," mused Archinal.

Penrose laughed merrily.

Horse Thief Payoff

PeeWee Kelton switched mounts with the frontier's wiliest horse thief. . . .

By WILLIAM HOPSON

THE dust cloud first appeared as a tiny ball on the flat, ugly, dry horizon of the desert. In the shade of the sahuaras, the greasewood and cacti, the jackrabbits, dozing with long ears laid back, raised them and then turned and loped away from this thing that came on with a drumming sound like distant thunder. The dust cloud grew larger, took shape, and the drum of the horse's hoofs came nearer.

The horse was coming at a steady lope, its flanks and shoulders wet, the slobbers of foam dropping from around the bit in its mouth. It was a moth-eaten mustang, a little bony, and it looked as though it would drop at the next step. Actually it could keep up that steady lope for an astonishingly long time.

The rider just about matched the horse in appearance. He was ragged, unshaved, and looked as though he hadn't had time to take a bath for about a month. As a matter of record, this latter was true. He called himself PeeWee Kelton, though a lot of sheriffs called him a lot of other things.

He turned in the worn-out saddle and looked back for about the fortieth time during the past hour. So

far no ominous second cloud of dust to disturb the heat waves.

"Can you beat it?" he snorted to himself and nobody else in particular. "All I do is drop in that one-hoss-town to try and make a little trade and that two-bit constable hollers, 'Hoss Thief Kelton,' and I got to dust again. It's gittin' plumb monotonous."

It had been getting "plumb monotonous" for more than a year now. All he had done was trade a broken-down roan to a shifty-eyed, itinerant horse trader who came through, paid fifty dollars boot, and got himself a fine black gelding. Two days later an irate cowman showed up with a dozen hardcase punchers, hard on the trail of a stolen horse. The moment the rancher spotted the gelding he had yelled, "There's my hoss an' there's the thief who stole him. Get him, boys, an' we'll string him up right now!"

There hadn't been any time for arguments. The present rider of the piebald had merely straddled the fleet black and lit a shuck; and word had gone out to every sheriff in the country to watch out for the notorious Horse Thief Kelton. It had been that way for over a year now, and every time word of his passing came along ranchers locked up their corrals and put out night guards. He was recognized everywhere, he couldn't get a job, and the normally cheerful rider of the piebald had about decided to strike out further west and take up life anew.

The only fly in the ointment was that the piebald had about reached the limit of its endurance, PeeWee was flat broke and hungry, and somewhere back there in the desert the constable and a few cowboys were hard on his trail with fresher, and better, horses than the worn-out, skinny piebald.

That was about the state of affairs when PeeWee topped the ridge and saw the settlement nestling among the cottonwoods a half mile below. The sight of it brought little joy to his soul. His only hope was to find somebody with a broken-down horse that was fresh, make a quick even swap, and keep on going.

He rode into town a bit cautiously and began eyeing the numerous horses racked under the trees. There was no thought in his mind of stealing one. He had never stolen a horse in his life. He'd simply swapped off the ones everybody *said* he'd stole.

"Not much prospect here," he said gloomily and then hailed a tobacco-chewing oldster sitting on a soap box in the shade and lazily scratching himself.

"Friend," he said plaintively, "you wouldn't know of anybody who'd like to swap a horse fer this magnificent specimen of horsehood you now see before you?"

The native spat, watched the disgusted horsefly crawl off to dry itself, and squinted. "Where is this horse yo're talkin' about?" he inquired. "I don't see 'im."

"What?" PeeWee almost yelped. "Where is he? Right in front of yore nose."

"Friend," the other said sadly, "you been robbed. Somebody took advantage of yore youth an' good looks to trade you that piece of busted-down cayuse. We ain't got no glue factory here, so I suggests that you go down to the end of the street to which you'll come to a corral. In that corral you'll find several fine specimen of horsehood o' about the same fine qualities as that broomtail yo're ridin'. Feller blowed in here day 'fore yisterday an' has been doin' a little tradin'. Calls hisself Honest John—"

Something exploded inside PeeWee's tired and disgusted brain. "Why that—that—" he spluttered and sailed off down the street in a cloud of dust.

HE CAME to the corral and rode around to where a shifty-eyed individual sat in the shade waiting for customers. PeeWee rode up and glared down. It was "Honest John," all right. The same Honest John who had traded him the black gelding over a year before and started the whole business.

John looked up and rose to his feet with alacrity, eyeing the ragged rider without recognition, for he dealt with many men. This was just another tramp rider who would make any kind of trade. Honest John eyed the piebald. It had the lines of a good mustang, and a few weeks on grass with a bit of grain and it would bring double the twenty-five dollars that the trader Honest John was prepared to offer.

"Get down, friend, get down," he greeted, rubbing his hands together. "Honest John is the name and if you're looking for something fine in a trade, or wish to sell, you've come to the right place."

PeeWee swung down, instinctively glancing over his shoulder again. No telling what minute that posse would blow in and start asking people like the tobacco-chewing oldster the whereabouts of one Horse Thief Kelton.

"Trade or sell?" Honest John asked.

"Trade," said PeeWee looking them over. Most of them were of a collection as motley looking as the piebald. But there was some good horseflesh among them, including a sleek four-year-old bay with a blaze face. That horse, PeeWee's experienced eye told him, was built for speed and endurance. "Even. No boot," PeeWee added.

"Fine, fine. Now you take that little dun over there. Of course he's a little saddle-galled an'—"

"You take him," PeeWee interrupted. "I want that bay with the blaze face an' I want him pronto."

"Whaaat!" Honest John almost roared. "Why, what kind—"

PeeWee fixed upon him a baleful eye. "Listen, Mister Honest John. That bay is mine. He was stole from me six months ago an' I been huntin' him ever since. I'm takin' him an' then I'm callin' the sheriff."

Honest John's face turned a shade pale. He almost wrung his hands. "Now listen," he pleaded, "I didn't steal him, honest, that's me. But I don't want no trouble with the law. You go ahead an' take him and I'll swap you even."

"You'll swap me even, hah! You'll pay me one hundred dollars for this piebald to boot to keep me from talkin', savvy? Dish out!"

Honest John begged and cajoled while PeeWee unsaddled and led out the beautiful animal. In the end he gave in. PeeWee pocketed the hundred dollars and swung up. From the saddle he looked down.

"You can have the piebald," he said. "I swapped him from a feller I know stole him."

"Never mind that," the horse trader almost shrieked. "Just flog outa here an' don't you ever come back."

PeeWee flogged out, turning as the dust cloud topped the distant horizon. He grinned to himself and turned in the saddle, heading for far western pastures where his name was not known. He felt the great surge of power beneath him and chuckled.

"Say, this is some hoss," he said gleefully. "I wonder who he belongs to?"

Brand of the Caprock

Because the trail of those rustled cattle led straight to his girl friend's door, Jim knew that the code of the range would make him her father's executioner.

I pulled the trigger just as Gotch cleared his holster.

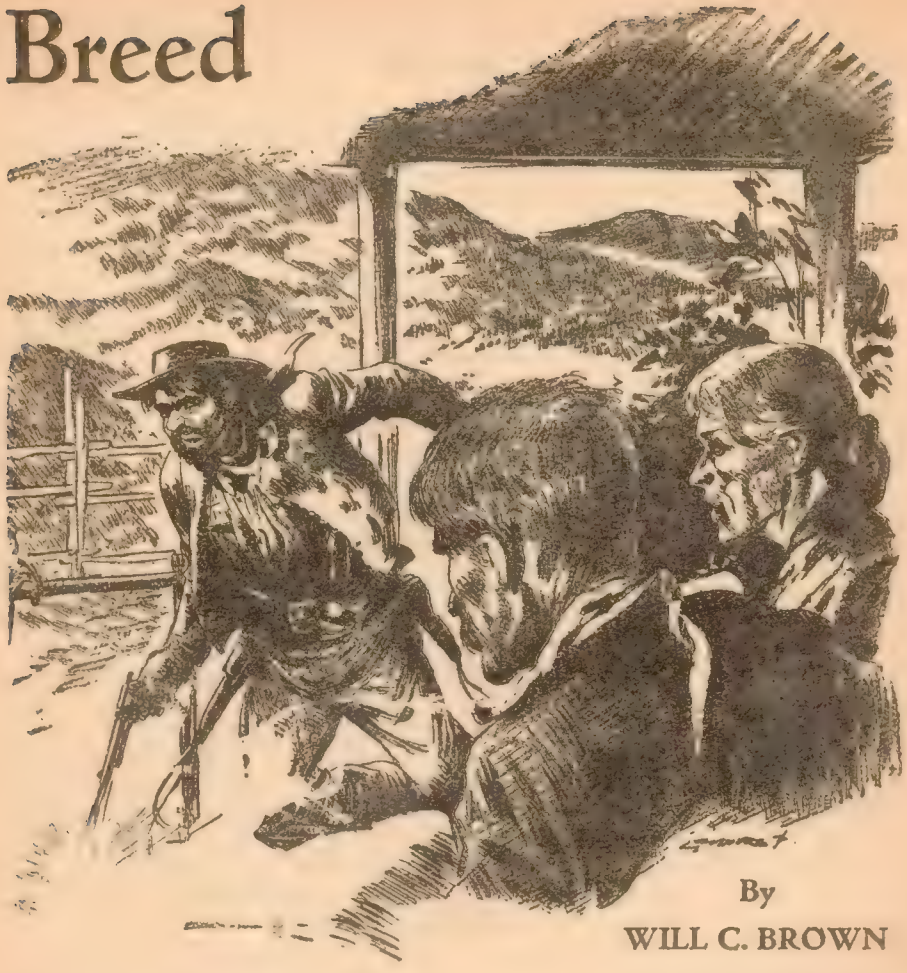
MILES CAME BACK to the line camp about the middle of the morning, sooner than I expected. Quick as I heard the horses I punched up the fire and wondered if he'd found out anything. He came in the door with the line rider, Gotch, trailing buffalo-dirty behind him. He looked at the coffee pot, then quick to me with as near a flicker of approval as Miles ever showed.

He poured himself some coffee, warming his hands on the mug while he downed it, then he went over and took Gotch's lever Winchester off the wall. So I knew we were going to Tanner's.

Miles pulled his six-gun out of his holster, looked at it, and pushed it back. Gotch saw that, and went through the same motions, and then I did too. Miles seemed to frown, but he didn't tell me to stay there, only walked out with his lips pulled white-blue as his eyes.

A sharp butcher knife would have felt no worse than that Caprock norther. But I was glad to get out of Gotch's pig-pen shack. It smelled.

Breed



By
WILL C. BROWN

They waited till I saddled, then we rode south with the norther at our backs and our horses hunched up behind, and dry, icy dust blowing along ahead of us.

I never had heard Miles raise his voice, even when he was mad. But you could always understand what he said, even in a blue norther.

"Gotch's tally was about right. Hundred head missing."

That was what I'd expected. But to actually hear it sent something colder down my spine than that wind off the North Pole. I knew Miles wasn't thinking about me then, or the big line rider on the other side of him, or even of the longhorns that ought to have been there and were not. He was thinking, like I was and maybe Gotch was, of old John W. Matthews. That was my grandpa up at the home ranch and he ran that country like he'd put it together.

For anybody that knew John W., it was a case of Miles had to bring in those Seven-O hides or the hides of the men that took 'em. Or John W. would soon have a new range foreman bossing the thirty square miles of his Caprock kingdom. I guess John W. was what you'd call a hard

customer. He hated a cow thief worse than drought or carpetbaggers. He had strong ideas about everything. Such as sending me riding with Miles whenever he could manage it.

I caught on that what he actually was doing was trying to teach me the business under the smartest range boss in Texas. That was why I was off on that trip with Miles, checking the line camps. Grandpa was like that—he would send Miles out in the dead middle of a blizzard to ride up on some far-off herd hand when the hand least expected it. He was always bound to know what was going on, in every last dry creek and crevice of that desolate Caprock range.

Beside his strong ideas about cow thieves, he also was outspoken about the few stray homesteaders that had drifted past the Brazos.

"Main reason I come out here," he would complain, "was to get away from the rest of Texas and the cryin' over the South's spilt milk and run my cattle where there's elbow room. And now the damn state's a-followin' me—homesteaders and thievin' trail buyers. Keep your guns oiled, boys, and count your herds every sunup."

But I never heard him rant much against Tanner. He just told me once that "a rabbit-twistin' homesteader, name of Tanner," had taken up three sections of state land below our south line. He ordered Miles to see that the riders, especially Gotch at the line camp, kept an eye open down there. But from the tone of it, I gathered he had sized up Tanner and didn't think the newcomer was much to worry about. Just a poor, grubbin' wagon-and-hound man from deeper down in Texas, out trying to pull a bare-handed living off of a new free land. Well, he picked about the worst place this side of hell to try it in.

They come either big or little in the Caprock, which is nothing to do with size, and there just wasn't any in-between. It had to be that way in that country. A little man would resort to stealing a cow or a load of mesquite wood, to warm by, that a big man had earned, and the big man would ride all night in a blizzard to kill him for it. I wasn't nineteen yet. But that much I already knew about the Caprock. Some I knew myself, and some I got by just watching Miles work, but most I got from John W. Matthews. He had tackled it all bare-handed, forty years before, and he knew.

So on the way to Tanner's I wondered why a man would wagon-and-hound it all the way out to that God-cursed country, and starve and freeze his family. Then wind it all up by driving off a hundred head of somebody else's longhorns and slip them to a tramp trail buyer—hell, he could of stole more comfortably and not hanged any higher, if he'd stayed in the East Texas thickets.

GOTCH had an edgy voice around Miles. I reckon Miles didn't like to hear him mouth any more than I did. But when the wind wasn't blowing the words back down his whiskers, he was trying to tell Miles what he thought about it. Not that Miles cared much for Gotch's ideas.

"First missed 'em about a week ago," he went on. "Saw that damn Tanner feller ridin' along that windbreak on our place a few times. He's shifty. Soon as I could get a fair tally, I seen we was short."

"He would need some help with that many," Miles told us. "You find any tracks?"

"Yeah. Tracks toward Tanner's. And he's got young 'uns could of helped him. The damn nester took 'em, all right. I jumped him about it."

Miles turned and looked icy at Gotch.

"Jumped him, huh? What did he say?"

"He wanted to get mean." Gotch laughed in a scornful whine like a sick bull, and looking at him I saw the reddish dots of eyes in his thick face burn small and hard. It was like he had a personal grudge in it. "Yep, said he was no thief and ordered me off his land."

Miles said, "Well, it was his land."

Gotch was dirty, like his shack. His whiskers were dirty and the ridges around his bead-red eyes seemed caked, and there was a reddish scratch or thin scar on his big cheekbone that looked crusted with the dust of the norther. We all got dust-caked on Seven-O but Gotch could look dirty even after coming out of a creek. He shut his mouth after Miles spoke, and I wondered how Miles could handle so many men, bigger and meaner than he was. But he did.

We turned down a draw that knocked some of the cold wind off of us, and Miles showed me where our land ended along the edge of the low wash that cuts a snake's path long and ugly as far as you could see.

We pulled up on the other side, on Tanner's land, and were riding through a thin mesquite brake. Suddenly, Miles raised his hand and motioned off to the left, and I saw the rider coming through the mesquites. The most you could see was a skinny gray horse, following a wobbly calf, and a dried-up little rider hunkered in a big coat in the saddle.

"That's the damn homesteader!" Gotch grunted, squinting his eyes. "That's Tanner. We oughtta—"

"That's a woman!" Miles said. He kicked his horse, and we caught up with him as he bore down through the mesquites.

She heard us coming and turned in the saddle, pulling up on her horse. We sat there, the three of us, standing in our stirrups and staring at her, and she stared back. Of course, it was Miles who first had the gumption to touch his hat brim. Then I followed suit, and Gotch just scowled at his saddle-horn, but I was paying no attention to anything but what I saw on that skinny gray horse.

The worn man's coat nearly swallowed her, but I saw eyes that were big and brown and not afraid, and a cold freckled nose, and cheeks that were a little pinched but curved enough to show what they could have been like if well fed. Under the old hat were blowing some loose ends of soft, dark hair, and even in the big clothes she was picture enough to make me remember I hadn't shaved in a week and was all pink fuzzy and dirty. It wasn't until Miles spoke that I realized my mouth was hanging open.

"Who are you?" Miles asked.

She said, "I'm Addie Tanner." The voice was soft and wind-husky, but warm as late June, and polite as if we four had been good neighbors. She glanced toward Gotch and quickly away and back to me, and to Miles again, and said, "I suppose you are Seven-O men."

Miles asked her where we could find her pa, and she pointed off across the mesquites toward a dry creek we could see.

Miles headed that way, touching his hat again, and Gotch reined close behind him. But I twisted back and gaped, and my mouth had come open again. She was looking deep at me from those dark eyes, and we both turned away our heads in a hurry. I spurred on after Miles like a shot-at rabbit, not heeding the mesquite branches or anything.

After a while we sighted dust and knew it must be Tanner.

IT WAS like the Caprock for the norther to suddenly die, just as if it had never been blowing. The sun was out and the cold was thawing in my bones. The rider kept coming, while we waited, and Miles loosened

the Winchester in its boot and unbuttoned his sheepskin.

Tanner rode up and didn't speak. He got off his horse, bent over and looked at the crowbait's left front hoof, punched a rock out of it, then turned around and eyed us.

He wasn't young and he wasn't old, but he looked like he'd been used a lot by life and was a little tired. He was one of those leathery kind that can do an awful amount of hard work year on end, usually a good man to have with you. You want them on your side and the way to do it is to deal it straight and slow, with a plain deck.

I was wondering if Miles saw it the way I did. Or was it the girl back there I was still seeing?

"You're Tanner," Miles said. "I'm Miles, Seven-O. We're missin' some cattle." He never beat around the bush.

Tanner was thin-coated with dust so it looked like it was oozing out from inside him. You wanted to go scrape it off of him, wondering how he could breathe. But he didn't look filthy with it, like Gotch. The girl must have had his coat on. He was drawn from cold and his old Army .44 was strapped around him snug and high-waisted, like an East Texan. But his eyes stood up to Miles', like a double pair of steel blades rubbing and he didn't spare a glance at how Gotch was warming his gun holster and looking surly.

"Your man told me," Tanner said. "I been watching out, but I haven't seen any signs of 'em around here."

"We'll do some looking," Miles said briefly.

"Not on my land, you won't," Tanner replied. He sounded almost exactly like Miles. Same clear tone with just a little cactus on the edges. The hair itched on the back of my neck. Miles straightened a little in the saddle.

"Is that a threat, Tanner?"

"I just said you wouldn't do any looking on my land."

"Why not?"

Tanner jerked his head toward Gotch without moving his eye hold on Miles. "Because I've been ordered off your land. In language I wouldn't use on a coyote. Seven-O set the pattern for what kind of neighbors we'd be. All right. It works both ways."

It galled me. Gotch had no orders to do that. John W. wasn't quite that high-handed, not till he had a reason, anyhow. But Miles couldn't dust Gotch in front of the homesteader. Miles pulled on his hat brim hard and his jaw muscled tight.

"Tanner, we've lost a hundred head of beef. They wouldn't have drifted north against the wind. They wouldn't have left the herd and the cedar brake. They were driven off and they went south. I aim to find those cattle. Now that's all the palaver I aim to make with you."

Tanner's jaw was set just as tight. The looks between them was like a strung wire. Suddenly, a hundred longhorns didn't seem like much, to me, for here was bad trouble.

I said, "Miles, let's go back to the line shack. Maybe those cattle scattered in the brakes."

Gotch spit loud and said, "Hell!" like I was a lot worse scum than Tanner.

Tanner hadn't budged an inch. He stood his tracks, square facing us, three men from an outfit half as big as creation, with John W.'s power and name heavy back of us and enough guns on us to blow the homesteader back across the Brazos. And he didn't bat an eye.

"Miles," he said quietly, "if those cattle had drifted south, I'd have seen 'em. I'm telling you I didn't."

Gotch couldn't stand it. He jerked on his horse and cursed a big splash, then jawed at Miles.

"He's lyin'! Every damn nester's a liar. We go root around his place,

we'll find some hides with Seven-O brands, all right!"

"Shut up, Gotch!" Miles gritted with a scowl.

"Aw, don't be so damn mealy!" Gotch mouthed, not liking that in front of Tanner. "Old John W. wants them critters found. I don't like it—they's stole off'n my camp. Well, hell—let's go find 'em. He's probably et half of 'em by now and got his old woman and young 'uns hidin' the rest in some draw somewheres. Whole cowchip outfit's a crawlin' nest of thieves!"

IT WAS dirty talk. It made me squirm, almost made me want to hit Gotch. It looked like Gotch was feeling the weight of his gun and tasting fight. He was asking for it. But Tanner seemed frozen.

A man hurt outside shows it by the blood on him or the way a broken arm will hang, but a man hurt inside has got only his two eyes for it to come out of. It was coming out of Tanner's eyes. No man ought to have to suffer like that without chloroform. I turned my head and looked off across the country.

"Get him off of here!" Tanner's low words crackled. I didn't know what Miles was going to do, or what I'd have done in his place. Gotch was one big sneer of yellow teeth, the red welt in his cheekbone standing out raw. Tanner hadn't moved his hand and it hung a long way from his gun. It got by me, but it was what spoke to Miles. He turned, not too fast, to look behind us, and then I caught on too.

I don't know where she got it, or how she'd circled up silent as an antelope. But the long barrel of an old Confederate rifle seemed to come poking for us so close the hole was against my nose. She had it rested tight against a sapling for support, the hammer was back, and down at the stock end was that old hat with soft hair around the edges and one dark eye squinted for the aim.

"Gotch," Miles said very quietly, "don't move sudden. Jim, pull your horse around and lead off. Slow, now."

I was afraid to take my eyes off her, and afraid not to watch Tanner. If she happened to move that finger, one of us would get blowed to Mexico.

"We're leaving, Tanner," Miles said. "Tell her not to shoot."

But Gotch just then caught on. He jerked around and saw Addie Tanner and the big rifle all at once, and it stampeded his brain. We could hear the cusswords fall out of him as he ducked and yanked on his reins, grabbing at his leg gun.

I yelled, "Gotch, you fool! Look out!" I was clawing at my own gun and Gotch had made all the horses cut up and things were whirling so I didn't know whether I meant to pull the gun on Gotch or what.

The Confederate went off. Every horse jumped about three feet straight up and mine started bucking. The explosion was enough to nearly knock a man off his saddle. Bark and twigs rained and rattled. When I got my horse controlled, Miles and Gotch both had guns on Tanner, who still stood quiet as a stump. And Addie Tanner had plumb disappeared.

"Keep him covered!" Miles jerked a nod toward Tanner, then spurred down toward the sapling. When I risked a look back from the homesteader, Miles and Gotch were on the ground.

"Come here!" Miles called.

Both of us went down there. Something hard grabbed at the pit of my stomach. She was lying in the dirt and rocks, crumpled and twisted, like corn shucks wrapped in that loose, frayed coat. Those dark eyes were closed. The long rifle was in the weeds to one side.

"It kicked," Miles said. "She tripped, there, on that ledge. Fell back. Head hit that rock."

I was going to pick her up. But Gotch was closer. He bent over like he was going to rouse her or something.

"Get your hands off her!"

Tanner said that; words like bones cracking. He bore in and I never saw such a look of live hate. He knocked Gotch's big arm aside so hard as to unbalance him. On one knee, Tanner bent over and felt the back of Addie's head. Tender as a woman, he raised her a little.

Miles said, "I think she's just knocked out. Any water around here?"

"Two miles to Paintrock hole," Tanner said.

"How far's your house?"

"Not over three."

"Well, let's get her somewhere!" I chomped. The sight of Addie's pale, cold cheeks and the still lashes of her closed eyes was prodding me hard. I felt like we weren't doing enough, that we were slow and thick.

"She's just possumin'," Gotch snarled. He wasn't liking the way Tanner had shoved him. "She tried to shoot us in the back."

"That's a damn lie! You went loco!" I was mad about Addie being hurt. I was fed up with Gotch.

"Shut up!" Miles told me. "Tanner, you better get your horse."

It was me that held Addie Tanner in my own arms, gawky about how to do it, but holding her, while Tanner went off. And it was me that lifted her up to him, no heavier than a saddle and limp as a blanket. Her hair brushed my face. Tanner balanced her in front of him. I rode close to Tanner.

THERE was a pole corral and a shed, nothing big, but well kept; and a sod-lumber house with a pole lean-to. It was a solid built house, for a homesteader, the whole thing no bigger than our cook shack at Seven-O.

Mrs. Tanner was calm as anybody. She was standing there, with two boys, younger than Addie, and Tanner briefly told her, and she just went to work. All of them looked toil-thin, but clean starched and with something on them I guess you would call bred dignity. The room was swept speckless.

Tanner put Addie on a cot and Mrs. Tanner started bathing her face and using camphor. That left Miles and me standing in the middle of the floor, not knowing what to do with our hands or feet and feeling crowded.

"Anything we can do, Tanner?" It was the first time I ever heard Miles clear his throat before saying something.

Tanner was bending over Addie and spoke without turning. "There's coffee on the hearth in the back room."

That was better than standing there. We got mugs out of a crate cupboard. I saw some cold cornbread in a plate, but nothing else to eat, in sight.

Suddenly I was hating the big sprawling house at Seven-O with its two cooks and John W.'s thirty riders and six thousand head and the fine bunkhouse and corrals that spread over five acres. The Tanners were already starving—if Tanner was our cow thief, the rest of them would starve sure enough. We were out to find the stuff stolen off Gotch's pasture, with John W. Matthews prodding from back there out of sight, and I wasn't relishing the way it was turning out. I was even sore at Miles, for no reason, and hated the Caprock.

Miles jerked me back. He was bending at the hearth that was clean as Mrs. Tanner's apron, pouring coffee, and reading me, I guess, from

the back of his head. He spoke quietly, but the old cactus edge was on it.

"Come to. We started out to find a hundred head that was stolen from us. We haven't found them yet."

"What's a hundred head of longhorns?" I muttered hotly. "Seven-O won't starve."

He stood up and his eyes blazed at me like a slap. "There wouldn't be a Seven-O, son, if we turn our back even once. They can take just one damn dogie at a time and break you—if they do it long enough. If you don't put out sparks, you got a prairie fire." He seemed to relax after that and his voice went a little milder. "What's the matter, calico snagged you?"

"Shut up, Miles!" I gritted. My face burned.

The back door flew open. Ugly and puffing, his little eyes working fast, big Gotch filled the doorway, the red scab showing like a festered brand on his shaggy head.

"C'mere, Miles!"

Not wanting to look at Gotch, I turned my back. The door closed, and I heard them walking off. After a while, I went back in the room where Addie was.

The two kids were gone. Tanner and his wife were still beside the cot. Mrs. Tanner looked up. "She's all right. She's roused and tried to talk. I think it may have been only a light concussion."

The quilt was rising with her breathing and in that instant I saw her eyes open, move around, and softly close again.

Her lips started working and I strained, holding my breath. The look in her eyes, for that second, had been wild. Then her words came out in a hard, frightened whisper, but the room was so silent they sounded plain to our ears.

"Don't—Gotch! . . . Gotch! Gotch! Gotch! Get out of my way! I'll use this *quirt! . . . . I'll hit you, Gotch! . . . The quirt . . . quirt . . . quirt . . ."* Her voice trailed off.

IT WAS the words, and Mrs. Tanner's tight lips, and Tanner standing there looking at the floor—it was all there, if I could get it. Dazed, I reckon, my brain galloping. I don't even know what I was thinking. But I was across the room and I was grabbing Tanner's shoulder, maybe talking too loud, trying to pull something obscure and terrible out of it.

"What'd she say?" I shook him. "What was that, Tanner! What's Addie mean—*the quirt, Gotch?* Damn you, what was Addie saying—?"

He pulled away from me. Mrs. Tanner stood up and I whirled to her. Her chin was high and her mouth was tight, but her eyes blazed to match the fire I felt in my own.

"He won't tell you!" she said sharply. "We keep our troubles to ourselves and we bear our own burdens. We don't go begging for help! Anyhow not to neighbors like Seven-O. But I'll tell you! She hit Gotch. Lashed him with her quirt—you've seen that red streak on his face!"

I swallowed, galvanized to her eyes, and when I tried to speak, she just said: "He stopped her one day over in the mesquites. He—he was—unruly. She had to hit him with her quirt. She—got away."

When I could breathe and see, I faced Tanner. "Why didn't you—?"

"I'm a homesteader," he spoke quietly. "You folks are Seven-O. But we're used to handling our own affairs."

"You could have killed him!"

"Yeah, and been strung up for it. I told him I would kill him if he came within a hundred yards of Addie again. Not long after, your cattle were stolen."

"Listen, man!" I gritted. "Talk! Tell me something! What became of those cattle?"

"I figured that was Seven-O's worry, it's so high and mighty. But there was a scalawag trail buyer around here," Tanner said slowly. "He made me a proposition. I ran him off the place. That's all I know."

"How much? What did he offer?"

"Three dollars a round. I don't need three hundred dollars that way."

I wanted Miles. I wanted John W. there, and I wanted to hit Gotch. But Addie sat up then, throwing the quilt off, and looked wildly at us with her brown eyes, then more calmly, and tried to smile. The way those pink lips tried to smile in that pale, pinched face under that soft rumpled hair, was worse than the rest of it. I was over at the cot.

"You won't have to worry about Gotch anymore, Addie," I said.

She studied me, then felt the back of her head and tried to laugh.

"What hit me?" she asked.

"You just fell."

Quick remembrance and alarm came to her eyes. "Did I—was anybody hurt?"

"No, you didn't hurt anybody, Addie."

There was some kind of commotion outside. One of the boys stuck his head in the door and called for Tanner. I was bent down, close to Addie, and didn't look around any more, but I knew both Tanner and his wife were gone out of the room.

"Addie," I said. I caught one of the brown hands. She looked at me, level and thoughtful, then down at our hands.

"I'm—I'm sorry," she said, very low. "I didn't mean for the gun to go off."

"Addie, you feeling all right?"

"I—we don't like to have trouble," Addie said slowly. "I'm sorry about everything. We try to mind our own business."

"Seven-O is not like you think, Addie," I said.

"We—we're, well, new out here. It's an awfully big country. And sorta scary sometimes."

SOMEWHERE, in front, I had heard loud talking, but now it was quiet. Quiet that was heavy, like before a thunderstorm. I got up and went to the door. Then I went out in the yard, and to where they all stood halfway to Tanner's pole corral. Somebody was saying something to the boys, and they turned and passed me, without looking, and went back toward the house.

Tanner was standing there, and his wife, and Gotch planted spraddle-legged, and Miles with his fists on his hips. And all of them were looking down at something on the ground.

I came up and they saw me and looked back, with hard faces, to what was at their feet.

It was a cowhide. Two cowhides, maybe, half wadded up. And sticking out plain, like a rattler's tail, was a brand. Our brand. A Seven-O.

I stared at Miles.

"Gotch found 'em," he said. "He was rooting around Tanner's shed. They were hid under some hay."

That was a kick in my stomach and I couldn't look at Tanner or his wife. But I was white-riled.

"Who told you to snoop, Gotch?"

"That ain't the thing." Gotch leered at me triumphantly, through his whiskers. "Them's Seven-O hides. Hid in Tanner's shed."

"There was a thievin' trail man around here!" I shot at Miles. "Tryin' to buy strays at three dollars. Tanner ran him off."

Tanner spoke for the first time. I never saw such a look on a man. "Maybe he ran across Gotch."

Gotch bristled up, looking murder through his red eyes. The sight of that quirt lash scar on him made my blood boil until I was darned near blind.

"Whatta you mean by that, Nester?" he snarled.

"Wait a minute!" Miles' voice sliced out, cold and vicious. He hunkered down and spread out the hides, smoothed them full on the ground. Then he walked around them, studying every knife slice and edge. Then he straightened and his jaw was knotted.

"Gotch, you been skinning hides all your life. Tanner, he's been an East Texas farmer till three months ago. Those hides were cut by an expert."

Maybe it was a bluff. Maybe he knew. You never could tell about Miles. All he ever got was results. If he was running a gamble, it worked. Because Gotch got stampeded in the brain again. He bloated, then came unhinged like a stabbed grizzly, and I thought of my gun.

"You can't prove a damn thing!" Gotch bellowed. "You—"

"The money you got from the trail buyer," Miles cut in, hard. "It's on you now. That money belt bulges out, Gotch—you didn't have that gut a month ago!"

Gotch grabbed at his middle. Then, like a trapped animal, and knowing what he'd done, he began to claw, and that six-gun was coming out fast in his thick, beefy hand.

"Look out, Miles!" The words broke out of me. Because alongside Miles, too close to him, was Mrs. Tanner, and Miles was going to have to move six inches and that would make him too late.

Heavy and cold, my gun got out somehow and my finger worked by itself just as Gotch cleared his holster and his bullet spattered dirt. The blast of the explosions, the *whack* of the slugs, just kept going on, all the way to the ground with big Gotch. He kicked over, tangled up in himself, his gun smoking, and smoke was coming up to my nose. It was from my own gun. It was hot, now, and light as a feather and I stared at a dead man.

Mrs. Tanner covered her face. For about a minute nobody said a word.

LATER that day, up at the line shack, Miles and I sighted the horse hitched to the sapling and we knew whose horse that was. We spurred up.

John W., eagle-eyed and tall, with his frosty breath curling up through his mustaches, was waiting. He was leaning against the door. I reckon he couldn't go the smell inside. One arm was planted against the wall as he waited, the other hand hooked in his gunbelt.

We talked a little, while Miles and I unsaddled to let our horses blow. Miles just said we were short a hundred head. John W. was studying us with those black eyes that could see through a log.

"Find any trace of them cattle?" Grandpa finally growled.

"Sold to a trail tramp," Miles said shortly. "Ninety-eight head sold, two butchered. The hides planted on Tanner's place. Wanted to get even with Tanner."

"Where's Gotch?" John W., sometimes it seemed to me, could read through a granite cliff.

Miles said, "He's dead."

"You kill him?"

Miles shook his head. I thumbed my toe around on the ground. Maybe Miles cut a glance at me. Grandpa was staring hard, right into my eye sockets, when I looked up.

"Tanner's got a daughter," Miles said. He jerked his head at me. "About his age. Gotch was a polecat. She was pretty."

Those two didn't have to draw pictures for each other. John W. looked at both of us, his eyes stitching it all over in his mind like a needle.

"Gotch represented Seven-O," I ventured. He had been our man—

(*Continued on page* 122)

"Range Hogs, Beware!"

THE gun hung awkward and heavy on Bart Fleming's lean leg as he pushed open the swinging doors of Poison Joe's Saloon. The place was full of the usual Saturday crowd of waddies and range bums. He made his way to a place at the end of the bar, trying not to notice the faces that swung toward him, the talk that had suddenly stopped.

At the faro tables in back, the talk started again. Now it was tense, nervous talk, almost whispering. Someone said, "Christ! He's finally got a gun! An' the whole McCullough crowd's in town today!"

The bartender, a stocky man with long sidewhiskers and a drooping mustache, wiped his hands on his dirty apron and came over.

"Whiskey," Bart said briefly. "Good whiskey."

The man put a glass on the bar and tried to control his hands as he poured. "McCullough's in town," he whispered audibly. "An' Deak Jaggert 'n Pere Francis 'n Arne Phillips are with him."

Bart Fleming watched his own reflection in the glass behind the bar. The face that looked back was somehow old. It was lean and tanned by sun and wind. There were heavy lines across the forehead and down from the corners of the mouth. The gray eyes were old and tired, as if he'd seen too much in twenty-seven years.

He nodded absently to the bartender, his eyes never leaving the reflection. He thought again of the gun strapped to his leg with rawhide. He hated the feel. It brought back too much of the past, too much of something that made him sick in his stomach.

Men started to melt away, drift out, trying to act nonchalant in their departure. Those that stayed watched the tall man sip his whiskey, their faces white and drawn, held by something stronger than themselves.

The bartender looked at Bart for a long moment, then gave up and moved down the bar. Bart fished for his makings. He leafed a paper and sifted tobacco in it. He noted with satisfaction that his hand was steady. Like the old days—

"It's Deak Jaggert!" someone yelled from the door. "He's heading this way!"

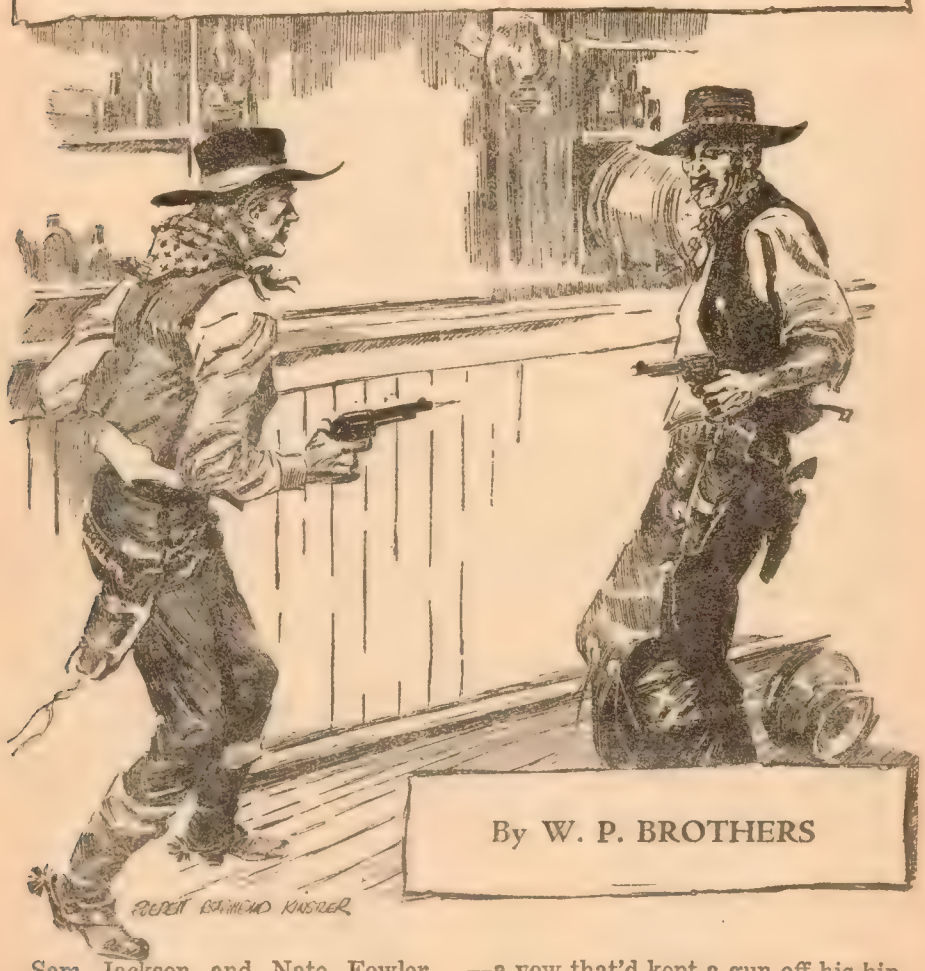
There was no change in Bart's face. Deak Jaggert, Pere Francis, Arne Phillips—it made no difference, he thought. They were all McCullough's men, all fast with a gun. He lit the cigarette and exhaled the smoke in a steady stream from his nostrils.

A man can't escape, he thought. Sooner or later the past catches up. There are some things a man can't run from, some things he's got to face and see through. He told himself these things, but yet he didn't believe them.

The Rocking K had looked like a good place for a man to steady down. It had good grass and there was plenty of water. Then four years after he'd taken over, Jason McCullough had moved his Hourglass in on the valley.

Jason McCullough had been ambitious. First thing Bart knew, McCullough had egged two of the other ranchers into a fight. And Deak Jaggert had gunned the men down. Arne Phillips, McCullough's half-brother, and Pere Francis, a thin, anemic-looking gun-slinger, had been the only witnesses and they swore it was a fair fight. Deak Jaggert was fast, all right.

In one blazing second, Bart Fleming had to learn anew the trigger talent he had tried to forget for seven long years.



By W. P. BROTHERS

Sam Jackson and Nate Fowler, small ranchers themselves, had sought Bart's help. But he'd shaken his head. It was something he couldn't do, even though he knew McCullough meant to get around to him.

So Bart had stood by and watched this, finding it hard to stomach. But it was easier to stomach it than break a seven-year-old promise to himself —a vow that'd kept a gun off his hip all this time.

He'd figured maybe McCullough would pass him up, leave him alone. There was that chance. There was a chance he'd have no need to buckle on his gun.

But Bart knew now that Jason McCullough wasn't passing anybody up—

The man's warning had been clear enough. Hard words had been spoken over some water rights, rights Bart knew Jason McCullough didn't give a damn about. "This is your warning, Fleming," McCullough had said. "Get out of Redrock! There's room for only one spread in this valley! If yuh're in town next Saturday, be wearin' yore gun—if'n yuh got one!" He'd finished with a sneer, looking at Bart's empty hip.

He'd thought about it on the long ride to the Rocking K. Then, late that night, he'd made a hard decision. The next morning he'd fished his battered gun out of a dusty, little-used trunk and oiled the holster. That had been a week ago, but the thing on his hip was still alien to him.

NOW he heard the door swing open. Deak Jaggert's heels made little clicks as he advanced along the plank flooring. There was no other sound in the room. Bart knew he'd never be as fast as he had been. But maybe he was still fast enough to beat Deak Jaggert.

He turned to face the man. Jaggert was short and burly. A half inch of dirty sweat-streaked stubble covered his chin and jowls. He looked clumsy. But a man in Deak's business didn't live long unless he was fast—plenty fast.

Jaggert's voice was guttural when he spoke. "I see you're still in town," he said. "That's too bad."

The tension in the air was a heavy, oppressive thing. Bart said, "I'll be around some time, Jaggert. You c'n tell McCullough that."

"You were told to get out," Jaggert said, his voice rising. "Now—"

He never finished the sentence. Bart whipped the whiskey glass in a sharp swift arc and sent the contents full in the man's dirty stubble of beard.

Jaggert gave a roar of rage. He spun away from the bar, knees stiffening. The whiskey dribbled from his chin.

Bart saw the hand start down. The rest was confused. Jaggert was fast, terribly fast. Bart's gun had scarcely cleared leather when he felt his palm catch the hammer ear. His six bucked and roared, then again and again.

A look of blank astonishment came over Jaggert's face. He lurched as each slug plowed into him. But he didn't go down. He stood there, swaying.

His own gun had been half up when he received the shock of Bart's first bullet. Now, with superhuman effort, he leveled it and fired his only shot.

Bart saw smoke and flame belch from Jaggert's gun. It was as if a mule had kicked him in the side. He reeled back along the bar, fighting to catch his breath.

Jaggert's gun dropped from his hand. For a brief second he looked like he was trying to say something. Then all meaning went out of his face and he pitched headlong. He was dead before he hit the barroom floor.

Bart's knees were like weak jelly. He shoved the gun back into his holster, forcing his legs to support him. It seemed to him he stood there for a long time looking down at the sprawled figure of Deak Jaggert on the floor before him.

Suddenly the room seemed to come alive. "Gawd!" someone said in an awestruck voice. "He's killed Jaggert! I never seen a faster pull!"

"The whole McCullough crowd'll be down here."

The voices were a steady roar in Bart's ears. He started the long distance to the door, forcing his legs to move, forcing back the nausea that threatened.

The smell of gunsmoke burnt his nostrils. It was as if seven years had been wiped away, seven years in which he'd tried to live down a past.

In seven seconds he'd wiped away those seven years.

An inner something told him to get on his horse and ride. When Jason McCullough heard Jaggert was dead, he'd spare nothing to have Bart Fleming gunned down. Not that Jason cared about Jaggert—but it'd be the excuse he'd been waiting for.

Bart didn't hanker to wait around where every door, every window might contain one of McCullough's men with a gun. In the open, a man could breathe, had room to move around, he thought vaguely. In the open, a man had a chance.

He was at the door now, pushing his way through it. There was a dead numbness in his body, as if his lower half had ceased to exist. He staggered out across the sidewalk and pulled himself into his saddle with all the strength he could muster. The buildings of the town seemed to press in around him, enclose him.

He thought of going to the ranch, of waiting for McCullough's men there. Then he decided against it. His two waddies and old Sam, the cook, weren't part of this. This was something he'd have to see through alone.

He raked his spurs across the big bay's flanks and hung on. Once out of town, he headed the animal up out of the valley, toward the distant hills.

THE blackness started to come up but he fought it back. He couldn't know how serious the wound was. His whole side seemed to have been ripped away with gunshot. As the initial shock began to wear off, fiery stabs of pain shot up through his whole chest. McCullough and his men wouldn't be far behind. If he could make the hills, keep away from them till dark, he'd have a chance.

Several times he felt himself slipping from the saddle. Each time, with an effort, he hauled himself back. Whenever he felt the horse begin to slow, he raked his spurs again. Then he was only conscious of keeping the animal moving and trying to stay astride. The world around him snapped in sudden little spurts from gray to black and then to glaring brilliance.

It seemed an eternity before he reached the foothills and the bay started to climb. He knew by instinct the sun was lower in the sky. But it'd be a long time before nightfall.

Twice he was sick, and after that he could hardly stay astride the bay. There was no strength in his arms. He let the horse have his head, wondering vaguely why McCullough and his men hadn't caught up with him yet.

A blackness was mounting slowly inside him, a surging tide that he couldn't keep back. Several times it almost engulfed him, but somehow it settled back. His mouth and throat were parched and his tongue felt swollen and thick in his mouth. Then the darkness came up again, higher and higher until it covered him. For a while he was aware of the horse beneath him and the pounding pain in his middle. Then there was nothing. . . .

It seemed a hundred years later that he opened his eyes. His breath came in uneven jerks and he felt a raging thirst in his throat. His whole body seemed to cry out for water.

The sharp, unbearable edge of pain was gone now. He thought he heard the splash of a mountain stream. He lifted his head with an effort and could see nothing but the deep foliage of trees. His thirst made the disappointment great.

Then, looking down, he saw the bay standing in the stream, bending to drink. He looked at it humbly, seeing the stream but unable to comprehend it was water. Then he gave a hoarse cry and let the reins slip

from his cramped fingers. He slid off the bay into the water.

When he touched the bottom, the pain in his side became a twist of agony again, and his knees buckled under him. He sank into the water on hands and knees. Its icy coldness kept him from passing out again.

He drank till he could hold no more. But his thirst was still there. He tried to stand, but his legs wouldn't support him. On hands and knees, he crawled to the edge of the stream, then up the bank. He wondered numbly how close Jason McCullough and his gunnies were. He tried to make it to some bushes along the bank where he could crawl in and hide.

Before he reached them, he collapsed.

WHEN Bart Fleming regained consciousness, it was raining. He had no idea of the time or where he was. It was nearly dark. He tried to get to his feet, but they wouldn't hold him. He crawled over under some bushes and lay back, trying to think. The big bay had headed toward water, bringing him here. He was certain McCullough's men weren't far behind. He couldn't figure how he'd lost them.

Thunder rolled overhead and lightning flashed through the sky. The rain beat down and he felt sick and weak. He wondered where the bay was, thinking about his saddle slicker tied to the saddle.

Again he tried to get up. This time he made it. His knees were shaky and he could hardly walk. In the half light, he saw the bay in the rain munching grass a dozen yards away. He made his way to it, grateful his luck held.

After he'd tied the horse to a clump of brush, he threw the slicker over himself. The jagged pain had subsided and was replaced by a dull, heavy throb. But there was no strength left in him. The whole side of his levis was stiff with blood.

He lay there thinking about the gun fight in Poison Joe's Saloon. Sickly he remembered another gun fight, some seven years ago.

He'd been young and wild then, proud of his lightning speed. The men he'd pulled against had been toughs, range bums, trying to earn a reputation. He'd learned quick that the man who shot first won any argument, right or wrong.

Then he'd hired his fast guns, tired of his job, punching cows at forty a month. They'd gone after the bank and he'd made a clean job of it.

But a posse was hot on their trail, and for once Bart Fleming was afraid. He didn't hanker to feel a rope around his neck. The outlaws had decided to fight it out. And of the four that held up the bank, only Bart had come away from that grisly slaughter.

He'd escaped in the dark. The posse figured they'd got everyone when they killed the other three. The others were known badmen. The sheriff hadn't known there was a fourth man, hadn't thought to trail further.

And Bart Fleming had learned later with sick horror that his brother had ridden with that posse! And his brother had been one of those who hadn't come back!

That day he unbuckled his gun and swore never to carry it again. Maybe he hadn't killed his brother—no, perhaps not, but he'd been a part of it. He was as guilty as the man who lined up the boy on his sights and pulled the trigger.

It was something that Bart Fleming would never forget. It was seared in his mind like a raw, festering wound. Something he knew would never heal.

He'd ridden then, checked out, gone as far away as he could. He'd wound up here in Wyoming, know-

ing that even if he went to Tibet, he couldn't escape from the thing he was running from. And he'd buried himself in work, sweated his guts out on the Rocking K, trying to forget.

And today he'd used that gun again. Didn't a man ever learn? Wasn't once enough, or did he have to learn every day what killing was? He tried to tell himself this was something he couldn't run from, that he couldn't hold his head up again if he let Jason McCullough run him out of the country. But what, he asked himself, was pride compared with a man's life?

It'd been pride before. He'd had a good deal of pride in his draw. And he'd paid for his pride—paid a grim price.

No, the past was never dead. It kept dogging a man, forcing him back into the same old ways. It was only men who were dead.

Now, it was McCullough against him. It was dog eat dog and no quarter given. He'd let things go so far they could only be resolved in death—now it was either McCullough's life or his own.

SUDDENLY he heard the noise of brush breaking and every nerve in his body became alert. The whole sky erupted in thunder and lightning again; the rain came down even harder. It trickled off the leaves and got inside the saddle slicker around him and soaked through his levis and flannels. Then the crashing in the brush subsided. McCullough's men had missed him. But he knew they'd be back.

Then suddenly as he lay there he knew what he had to do, what he should have done weeks ago. It was like some half-forgotten thing in the back of his mind, fuzzy at first, finally becoming startlingly clear and distinct. No matter how much the thought of a gunfight left him cold and sick with horror, there was no escaping. He couldn't escape the past. Well, he couldn't escape himself either. A man had to stand upright; he was a fool to bend too far in either direction, forward or backward.

That'd been his trouble.

There wasn't any doubt in his mind now, because he saw McCullough for what he was. A range-hog, a gobbler who sent his gunmen after what he wanted. There'd never be real peace anywhere until men stood up to people like McCullough. Sam Jackson and Nate Fowler had been right. He'd been kidding himself thinking there was any way of avoiding the issue.

Forcing himself to his feet, he stumbled over to where the bay was tied. McCullough's men were combing the brush for him. They were close; it'd only be a matter of minutes before they discovered the bay.

It was all he could do to pull himself atop the animal. Somehow he'd have to make it to Sam Jackson's or Nate Fowler's place. Together they could stop McCullough. Three men could do what one man couldn't. Otherwise Jason McCullough would pick them off, one by one.

He sat there, trying not to fall off, the saddle slick from the weather. Then he pulled the bay against a tree, out of the driving wind and rain, trying to get his strength back so he could ride.

It was dark now, pitch black. He strained his ears for some sound, but could hear nothing.

Presently, he moved away from the tree and started to double back the way he guessed he'd come. His wound was a raw, jagged thing inside him. But little by little he felt surer on the bay. The animal made no sound. He guessed there was heavy grass here, the reason McCullough's men had lost his trail.

Then the lightning flashed in star-

tling brilliance close to him, lighting up the surrounding trees. The bay heaved in fright and Bart Fleming saw the man not a dozen yards from him.

The other had seen him, too, and a hoarse cry tore from his lips. Before the quick flash of light had died, Bart saw the man's hand go for his gun. But the darkness closed around again and thunder split the air, close overhead and there was no chance for a shot.

Bart sat astride the horse, gun in hand now, waiting for the other to give sign of his whereabouts. But there was no movement, only the steady driving beat of the rain.

It seemed to Bart he waited an eternity. He guessed the other was waiting for him to make the first move, give a target in that utter blackness. Well, he'd sit him out.

Then lightning flashed again and Bart saw it was Pere Francis. His face was pasty and distorted in the sudden light. The man had moved a dozen feet to the left. Bart brought up his gun, swinging his body at the same time.

He felt his six jump in his fist with a roar. A stab of flame leaped from the other's gun, a split second late. The bay jumped in sudden fright and Bart felt the slug twitch his saddle slicker.

Now there was a rattling, rasping cough coming from the darkness where Pere Francis had been. It continued while Bart sat there in the blackness, waiting. Then suddenly it stopped and there was only the sound of the rain and wind.

The shots would attract the others. He touched his spurs to the bay, letting the animal have its head. Presently he heard other shots from a distance and he guessed it was a signal arranged between McCullough and his men.

Moving by instinct, the horse threaded its way through the trees, descended from the heights. Bart could see nothing; no familiar landmarks, but he knew the animal would head for the home corral.

The movement had opened up the wound again and he felt the blood running down his leg. The rain stopped. The only sound was the steady drip from the trees and the even *clop* of the bay's hoofs. He tried to keep from passing out, tried to think of anything but the flaming hell that was again in his body.

As soon as he hit a recognizable landmark, he thought, he'd head for Sam Jackson's or Nate Fowler's place. The three of them could stop Jason McCullough. The three of them could surely do it. Jaggert and Pere Francis were gone. That'd just leave McCullough and Arne Phillips, his half-brother. Without Phillips and McCullough, the rest of the punchers wouldn't fight; they'd run for it and scatter.

The buzzing and spinning got quicker in his head. He gripped the saddle-horn and shut his eyes. He could feel the rhythmic movement of the bay beneath him. He tried to shut the pain out of his mind.

WHEN he opened his eyes again, he was surprised to find it light. It was early morning. His hands still gripped the saddle-horn and the bay was moving quicker. He raised his head and looked around. They were in the valley once more, the Rocking K not more than two miles away. The animal was hurrying, knowing the nearness of the home corral.

Bart Fleming's wound was a dull, pounding throb now. The initial effects had worn off and his strength was slowly coming back. His head was clear.

He made his plans then. He'd change horses at the Rocking K and head for Sam Jackson's and Nate

(*Continued on page* 124)

Coyote Blood

Clint was only a kid—but man enough to live up to the grim Western code of an eye for an eye.

By

C. WILLIAM HARRISON

I STEPPED out of saddle where the trail topped the west spur of Skidoo ridge, dragging my Winchester out of its boot and carrying it with me. A tangle of buckbrush necked the trail in at this point, and I worked my way through the thicket until I came to the bare ledge that overlooked the old McAnnich line cabin. I crawled out on the ledge—

not too far—and squatted back on my heels. I didn't know how long I would have to wait.

It was hot up there. Shadows were stretching out across the floor of the valley, but where I was the sun was still an hour high. I kept moving my gaze along the valley, watching the scattered cattle as they stopped grazing and began drifting in twos and threes toward the few remaining pools of water along the parched bed of Gurney's branch.

I suppose I should have felt good because there was even that much water out there for the cattle to drink; after all, I had given it to them. I had felt pretty proud of myself at the time, especially when I overheard the whispers that traveled among the men at the bunkhouse.

"Clint is only sixteen, but that boy has what it takes. Big for his age and light as an Injun on his feet, like his pa was. He snuck up on Al Travers' boy—Mitch was guardin' the dam that night—and laid him out with one punch, right behind the ear. After that he opened up Travers' watergate, cool as you please, and let the crick fill up again."

I had felt mighty proud at the time, listening to the bunkhouse gossip about what I had done. But I didn't feel so good now as I squatted on the ledge above the old McAnnich line cabin. There wasn't any fun in packing a rifle that I knew I would need when I met up with Mitch Travers—or in knowing that Mitch was somewhere out in these hills gunning for me. I didn't feel very brave now; I was scared.

The old McAnnich line cabin was on a sort of bench low on the skirt of the ridge below where I squatted. It hadn't been used much since Al Travers bought out McAnnich nigh onto five years ago. Most of the mud chinking had fallen out from between the logs, and several of the shakes had been blown off of the east slope of the roof in the last storm. From where I was I could see the lower half of a window some puncher had shot out on his way back to ranch from a drunken spree.

An arroyo cut a deep track into the north flank of the bench, and made a natural trail up to the cabin's back door along which a rider might travel unseen by anyone watching from lower in the valley. I watched that arroyo, and I watched the cottonwoods that footed the ridge on the south end of the bench. Nothing moved down there, but I kept watching, with the Winchester loaded and ready.

I squatted there on the ledge, hot and thirsty and nervous, hating the night when I had knocked out Mitch Travers and opened the watergate. That was the hub of the whole trouble. Old Al Travers and my boss, Sam Kennett, were always quarreling. Old Al had been with Meade at Gettysburg, and Sam Kennett was with Auburn Locks Pickett in that suicidal charge across those fourteen hundred yards to Cemetery Ridge. The two were always quarreling about something, and when my boss wasn't blocking off the road Travers used as a short-cut to town, then old Travers was closing the watergate and cutting off the water Sam Kennett's cattle needed.

They were a hard-bitten pair, and they seemed to enjoy chewing at each other. Kennett always pulled the block off of his road after a couple days, and Al Travers always opened his dam before our cows went without water for very long.

The last time, though, was different. Old man Travers took down sick, and young Mitch picked up the quarrel. Mitch liked to throw his weight around, and when the creek began to dry up he refused to open up the dam. My boss sent Tom Cady over to see old Travers about the water, but Mitch wouldn't let Tom

in. He said he was running the ranch now. He would open the gate if and when he damn pleased, and he would stand guard to keep anyone from stealing the water.

THE whicker of a horse came through the hot afternoon silence. I turned my head, trying to find a direction for it, and my throat was suddenly dry and tight. Someone was prying through the tangle of buckbrush, and I heeled around toward the noise, jerking the rifle up. It was old Sam Kennett who came out of the brush, favoring the old wound in his leg and grumbling at the heat. I almost shot him, I was so jittery.

He didn't say anything for a while. He was a short man, leaned-down and ramrod straight, and with a thinning saddle of gray hair across his head. He squatted down beside me, and squinted down into the valley as he gnawed the corner from a plug of tobacco. He offered me a chew, but I shook my head.

"Reckon you are a mite young for eatin' tobacco," he said.

I didn't say anything. I felt a little guilty at him finding me up here, and just to show him that I wasn't a kid I took the plug out of his hand and bit off a corner. I rolled the tobacco into my cheek, and Sam nodded approvingly.

"Man old enough to pack a Winchester around is old enough for tobacco," he said. He looked around at me, then looked away again. "Janey reckoned I'd find you up here."

The tobacco tasted surprisingly sweet, and I wondered if it would make me sick again like it had that time last branding season when Tip Gilderry and I had tried chewing.

I tried to hold my voice steady because I didn't want him to know how scared I was. "How did Jane know?"

He shrugged. "Just a hunch, I guess." He was staring intently down into the valley, and I turned and looked across the rim of the ledge. Riders were working their way up the arroyo toward the old line cabin, four of them. The fact that they were using the arroyo instead of the trail told me all I needed to know. Mitch Travers and three of the Block T punchers were out hunting for me, and they were taking care not to be seen.

"Young Travers, all right," Sam Kennett grunted. "You can pick him off easy from here."

I stared around at him, but there was nothing readable in his face. I swung my gaze down into the valley again, picked out Mitch Travers' tall shape and watched him. Yes, it would be easy to pick him off from where I was. I would have to hold low because I was shooting downhill, but I knew I could put my bullet just above the buckle of his belt.

I tightened my grip on the Winchester, and pushed the barrel across the rim of the ledge. I raised the rifle until the walnut was snugged against my cheek, and began drawing the sights down fine. The riders were out of the arroyo now, swinging out of saddle.

Mitch was big and heavy-shouldered, and had a swaggery way of moving around. That was what I hated most about him, his cocksure arrogance. It was one of the reasons why I had raided the Travers dam that night and opened the watergate —just to cut Mitch down a notch from his high horse. But I hadn't counted on what I did to make Mitch send word that he was going to kill me on sight.

I had the bead drawn down fine in the notch of the rear sight, and both were centered on Mitch Travers' belly. The Winchester's barrel drifted off a little to the left of where I had decided the bullet would go, and I eased it back. My thumb was on the hammer, and I couldn't remember it being so hard to cock.

"An easy shot," Sam Kennett said softly. "Like shootin' a bottle off a wall, Clint."

I tried to put him out of my mind, for he had no place in this trouble. This was between Mitch Travers and me, and no one else figured in. A drop of sweat rolled down on my eyelid, and I blinked it away.

"Center him a couple inches above the navel," Sam Kennett said. "Always the best place to drill a man. They kick around for a while after they're down, but they're as good as dead."

I HAD the hammer cocked, and my finger was around the trigger. This was what I had wanted, a chance to get Mitch before he got me. I had him now, and he would never know what hit him. I saw a man killed once, belly-shot, and the memory of that came back at me as I drew the slack out of the trigger. I remembered how that man had been, and I knew just how Mitch Travers would be if I squeezed off that shot, I couldn't do it. I wanted to because I was scared for my own life, but I just couldn't do it.

I let the Winchester sag, and took the hammer off of cock. I started shaking then, and nothing I could do would stop it.

"Didn't think you could go through with it," old Sam said.

My hands and arms were trembling, and I wanted to cry. I was scared, of myself and Mitch Travers and of Sam Kennett for seeing that I was scared. I put the rifle down, but I couldn't stop my shaking.

"I'm sick. That's why I couldn't do it."

Old Sam's voice was slow and calm. "Must have been the tobacco. First chew usually makes a man sick. Might as well go back into the brush and get it over with, Clint."

I came back out of the brush feeling no better. Reaction to what I had almost done had drained all the strength out of me, and I was still sick. I sat down on a rock with my face in my hands so that old Kennett wouldn't see how it was with me.

"You'll feel better in a little while." He waited for a minute, then said, "You'll get another chance at him if you hang around a little longer. You'll never get a better shot at him, Clint."

I shook my head.

Old Kennett said grimly, "Young Travers swears he's going to kill you on sight. What do you aim to do about that?"

I didn't feel like talking, but he wouldn't let me alone. I wanted to forget about the trouble, but he kept pushing it back at me.

"I don't know."

"Then you better start figurin', Clint."

He didn't know how close I was to bawling. Hell, hadn't I been trying to find a way out ever since Mitch had made his threat to kill me? But there was no way out. I had to kill him, or he would kill me, and that was all there was to it. I'd had my chance, and couldn't go through with it. I knew I could never put a bullet into a man in cold blood, no matter how much I wanted to. That left me only two choices, to wait until Mitch caught me, or to leave the country.

"I'm getting out of here, Sam. I've got to."

"Think that will do any good?"

"I've got to, Sam." I couldn't hold my voice steady, and I didn't care. I wouldn't have fooled him anyhow. I was yellow; I knew it, and now he knew it. "I don't want any trouble . . . not this kind of trouble. I've got to go away someplace until this blows over."

Sam spat out his tobacco, and scraped a long furrow in the dust with his boot heel. "Might work at that." His voice was soft and dry. "Mitch is hot-headed, and he'll cool

off after a spell. You could wait until this blows over and then come back. But someone else would chase you out again sooner or later, so you might just as well leave country for good."

"I don't care. I'm going anyhow, Sam. I've got to now."

I tried to leave the valley. I got my pony out of the brush, followed the ridge to where it joined Lazy Squaw Mesa, and dropped into Ajo Basin. Night had closed in by then, and I rode steadily through darkness. It was easy at first to leave the valley behind me because I knew I would be coming back again after my trouble with Mitch Travers had blown over.

Then I remembered what old Kennett had said, "When you come back someone else will chase you away again, sooner or later. So you might just as well stay away for keeps."

I got to thinking about that, and I couldn't get it out of my mind. I couldn't stand the thought of never returning to the valley. That was where I was born, where my mother and father had settled and lived, and where all my friends were. It was Janey Kennett's home, and I remembered that it had been in my mind to always be near her. Janey was a year younger than me—just turned fifteen—and I wanted to be near her when she was a grown woman and I was a full man.

I wondered what lay ahead of me if I kept on riding. Escape from Mitch Travers, sure; but what else? How could I know that there wouldn't be another Mitch Travers somewhere up the trail to start me running again? I couldn't run forever from trouble.

That was when I stopped my horse. I held it there, thinking about everything. I couldn't dodge trouble forever; I had to make a stand sometime and fight back.

I swung my horse slowly, and pointed it back toward home ranch. I wasn't any braver than I had been before, but I knew now what I was going to do. I was going to see Mitch Travers come morning, apologize, and ask him to forget our trouble. It wouldn't be easy to do, but it was better than running away.

IT WAS after midnight when I unsaddled and slapped my horse into the west pasture. I went to the bunkhouse, but I stopped at the door, suddenly afraid to go in. I was sure to wake up some of the boys, and then there would be a lot of questions and meaning side-glances that I didn't feel up to meeting yet. I turned away from the bunkhouse, went to the barn and threw myself down on the straw.

I lay there for a long while, staring up into the darkness, wondering about Mitch Travers and what Janey thought of me. Along toward dawn I finally went to sleep.

Next morning was Sunday, and the boys always ate in the main house kitchen on Sundays, at a later hour than on work days. They were already at the table when I went across the barn lot to the house. I poured water into the wash basin on the bench outside, lathered my face with soap—and suddenly I stopped washing. One of those voices inside the kitchen was Mitch Travers'.

I stood there for a long while with my face lathered and the soap still in my hands, listening to him. He was telling them all about it, Janey and all the rest.

"I was riding around the ridge from the old McAnnich cabin when I saw him. He must have known where I was, but he wasn't having any of me. Not any at all. He was heading east across the Basin last I saw him, and he was making that pinto of his travel. Last time that fellow will show around these parts."

All the boys inside the kitchen had stopped talking, and there was si-

lence. Then Janey spoke in a voice that was sharp with anger.

"He'll be back, Mitch Travers. Clint will come back."

I put down the bar of soap while Mitch laughed in that bold, rash way of his. "If he does, I'll kill him. Or I'll make him tuck his tail and run again, like he did yesterday."

It was all I could take. I didn't have a gun with me, but I didn't think about that. I wiped my hands on my pants, opened the door, and went inside. Everybody turned away from the big table and looked at me —Mitch with his eyes widening and his mouth sort of sagging—and for a minute there wasn't a sound in the room.

Then old Kennett said, "My gun is hanging on the wall, Clint."

I stepped over until I was near the gun, and I raised my hand to the curved bone handle. I didn't draw the gun. I just put my hand on it and looked at Mitch.

He got up slowly out of his chair, took a step away from the table, and stood very still. We watched each other for a while, and all the time his eyes got wider until you could see the whites around them, and his face got gray along the mouth and up in his cheeks.

Then he reached down and pulled his gun—slowly—and just as slowly he opened his fingers and let the weapon fall to the floor. After that, he turned with a funny kind of crying sound, and ran out of the house.

I went outside, too. I went out with Janey calling after me, and I locked myself inside the bunkhouse. I threw myself down on my bunk, all weak and sick inside, and I wanted to bawl but for some reason I couldn't. After a while I got up, and dug into my war bag until I found the small buckskin pouch my dad gave me just before he died. I opened the door, and Janey was waiting for me outside.

"Breakfast is ready, Clint," was all she said.

We walked together back to the house, not saying anything. I stopped again at the wash bench and the small broken mirror tacked to the wall, and Janey watched me as I opened the buckskin pouch and took out the razor my dad gave me.

I didn't have much on my chin, only the thin, downy beginning of a beard, but with Janey watching me I scrubbed soap lather into it and picked up the razor. After all, it's fitting and proper for a man to begin shaving when he's turned sixteen and has a girl like Janey to hold breakfast for him.

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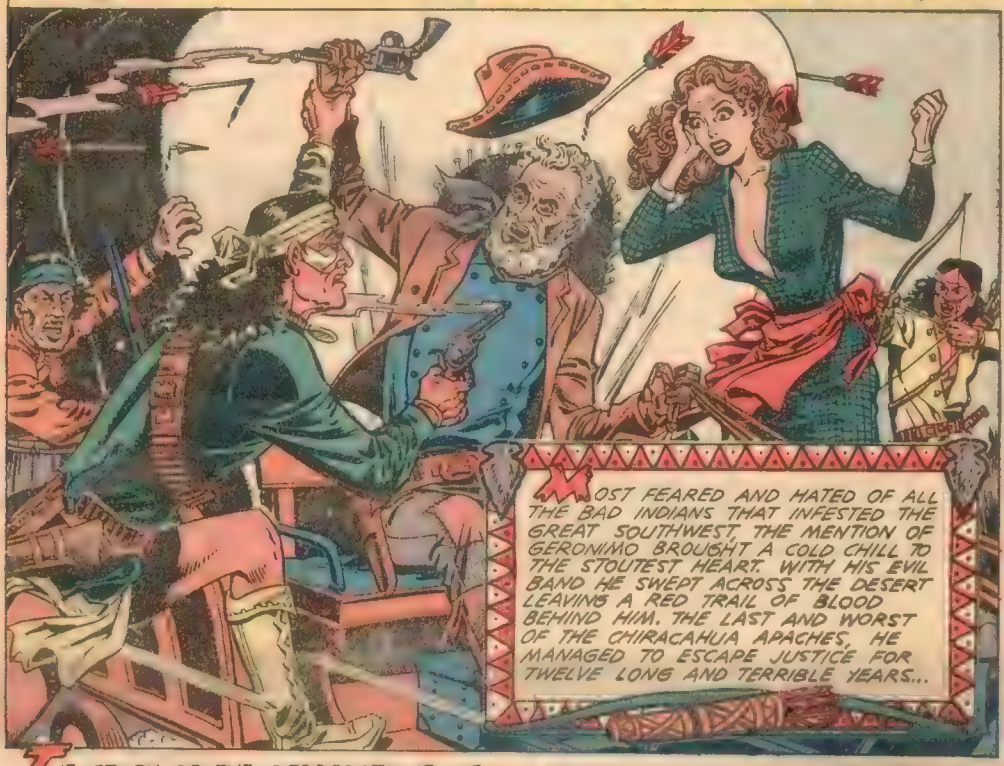
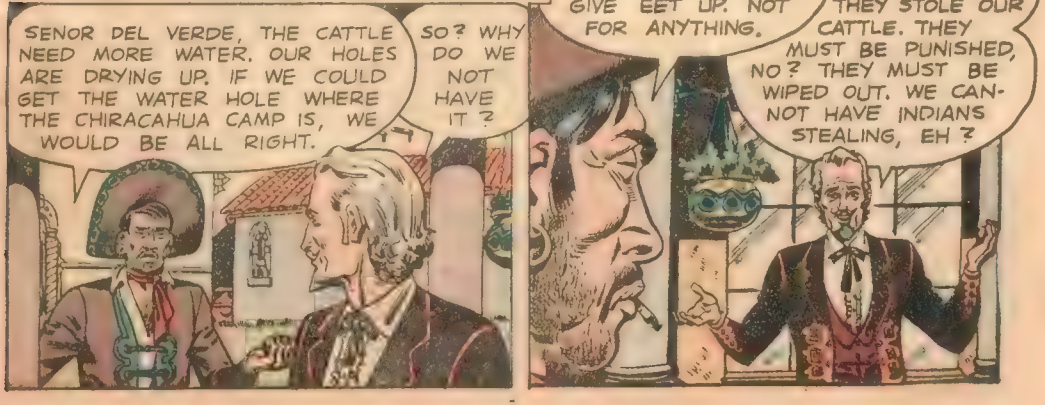
GERONIMO

AND HIS HORDE OF REDSKIN DEVILS!



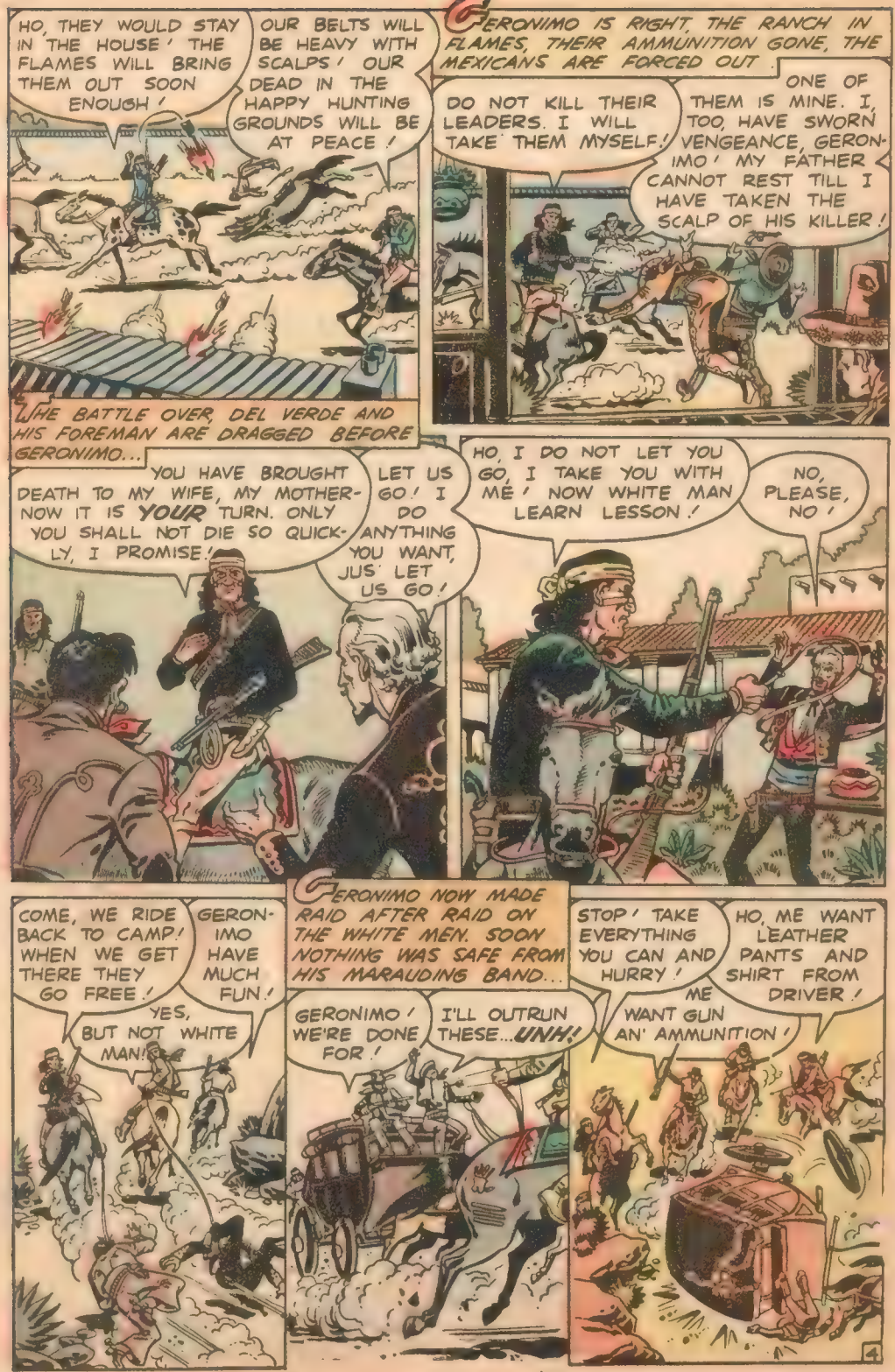
MOST FEARED AND HATED OF ALL THE BAD INDIANS THAT INFESTED THE GREAT SOUTHWEST, THE MENTION OF GERONIMO BROUGHT A COLD CHILL TO THE STOUTEST HEART. WITH HIS EVIL BAND HE SWEPT ACROSS THE DESERT LEAVING A RED TRAIL OF BLOOD BEHIND HIM. THE LAST AND WORST OF THE CHIRACAHUA APACHES, HE MANAGED TO ESCAPE JUSTICE FOR TWELVE LONG AND TERRIBLE YEARS...

THE STORY OF THE DEPREDATIONS OF GERONIMO REALLY BEGINS IN THE GREED OF A SONORA RANCHER, MIGUEL DEL VERDE...


SENOR DEL VERDE, THE CATTLE NEED MORE WATER. OUR HOLES ARE DRYING UP. IF WE COULD GET THE WATER HOLE WHERE THE CHIRACAHUA CAMP IS, WE WOULD BE ALL RIGHT.
SO? WHY DO WE NOT HAVE IT?
EET EES IMPOSSIBLE. THEY WOULD NEVER GIVE EET UP. NOT FOR ANYTHING.
NO? BUT THEY ARE THIEVES! THEY STOLE OUR CATTLE. THEY MUST BE PUNISHED, NO? THEY MUST BE WIPED OUT. WE CANNOT HAVE INDIANS STEALING, EH?

I UNDERSTAND, SENOR. I WILL ROUND UP THE MEN. WE RIDE TONIGHT!
SPLENDID, TORRES, YOU UNDERSTAND SO WELL.
WHAT EVENING AT THE WATER HOLE WHERE GERONIMO LIVES WITH A SMALL BAND OF THE CHIRACAHUA APACHE...
HO, GERONIMO, YOU THROW WITH THE EYE OF THE EAGLE AND THE STRENGTH OF THE PUMA.
LOOK! RIDERS!
IT IS THE WHITE MEN! PERHAPS THEY WANT TO MAKE TRADE WITH US.
I LIKE THEM NOT. I WISH THEY WOULD STAY AWAY.
THERE IS NOTHING TO FEAR. WHY SHOULD THEY HARM US?
I DO NOT KNOW, BUT THEY TAKE WHAT THEY WANT. THEY DO NOT BELIEVE IN HONEST TRADE.
I NO LIKE THIS.
WELCOME, BROTHER. WHAT IS IT YOU WISH IN OUR CAMP?
YOU KNOW WHAT WE WANT, REDSKEEN. WE WANT THE CATTLE YOU STEAL FROM US!
WHAT CATTLE? WE HAVE NOT TAKEN THE WHITE MAN'S STOCK! WE DO NOT EVEN KNOW WHO YOU ARE. LEAVE OUR CAMP AT. UNHH!
SO, YOU DENY EET! I DO NOT STAND FOR THE LIAR!
CHANUZ! OHHH!
SI! SI! THEY DO NOT TAKE THE WHITE MAN'S PROPERTY AGAIN!
TEACH THESE THIEVES A LESSON THEY DO NOT SOON FORGET! WIPE THEM OUT!
MY WIFE! MY MOTHER! I MUST GET THEM OUT OF HERE!
2

GERONIMO! OHHH!
HELP ME! HELP ME! UNHH!
I WILL GET YOU AWAY FROM THESE KILLERS! I AM COMING! THEY WILL.. LOTIA! LAMUZ!
THESE MURDERERS WILL NOT KILL ME. I WILL LIVE FOR REVENGE, BUT I WILL LET THEM THINK SO.
ALL RIGHT, EES ENOUGH, THEY ARE NO MORE.
SI, THE WATER NOW CAN BE DRUNK BY WORTHY ONES, EH. SENOR DEL VERDE'S CATTLE!
LATER...
YOU HAVE DONE WELL. SENOR DEL VERDE WILL PAY MUCH FOR THIS. YOU HAVE SAVE HIM PLENTY MONEY.
WE ARE ALL THAT ARE LEFT.
UGH! DEL VERDE! ALWAYS I WILL REMEMBER THAT NAME. I WILL AVENGE MY TRIBE!
WE HAD DONE NOTHING. WHY DID THEY DO IT?
I DO NOT KNOW AND I DO NOT CARE, BUT THEY WILL PAY.
I SWEAR UPON THE HONORED BONES OF MY ANCESTORS THAT ALL WHITE MEN WILL FEEL THE POWER OF MY WRATH. I SPEND MY LIFE IN VENGEANCE!
I AM WITH YOU TO THE DEATH, GERONIMO!
A MONTH LATER GERONIMO HAD GATHERED A BAND THIRSTING FOR REVENGE AGAINST THE WHITES. THEIR FIRST RAID WAS AGAINST DEL VERDE...
WE ARE READY WHEN YOU GIVE THE WORD, GERONIMO!
IT IS NOW! I CAN WAIT NO LONGER!
MOMENTS AFTER, THE WILD, TERRIFYING WARCRY OF THE APACHES RINGS OUT AS THEY SWOOP DOWN ON THE DEL VERDE RANCH...
EEYAH! HIPYAH!
APACHE! GET THE... AAGH!
THE FLAMING ARROWS! WE MUST LEAVE NOTHING!


HO, THEY WOULD STAY IN THE HOUSE! THE FLAMES WILL BRING THEM OUT SOON ENOUGH!
OUR BELTS WILL BE HEAVY WITH SCALPS! OUR DEAD IN THE HAPPY HUNTING GROUNDS WILL BE AT PEACE!
GERONIMO IS RIGHT. THE RANCH IN FLAMES, THEIR AMMUNITION GONE, THE MEXICANS ARE FORCED OUT.
DO NOT KILL THEIR LEADERS. I WILL TAKE THEM MYSELF!
ONE OF THEM IS MINE. I, TOO, HAVE SWORN VENGEANCE, GERONIMO! MY FATHER CANNOT REST TILL I HAVE TAKEN THE SCALP OF HIS KILLER!
THE BATTLE OVER, DEL VERDE AND HIS FOREMAN ARE DRAGGED BEFORE GERONIMO...
YOU HAVE BROUGHT DEATH TO MY WIFE, MY MOTHER- NOW IT IS YOUR TURN. ONLY YOU SHALL NOT DIE SO QUICKLY, I PROMISE!
LET US GO! I DO ANYTHING YOU WANT, JUS' LET US GO!
HO, I DO NOT LET YOU GO, I TAKE YOU WITH ME! NOW WHITE MAN LEARN LESSON!
NO, PLEASE, NO!
COME, WE RIDE BACK TO CAMP! WHEN WE GET THERE THEY GO FREE!
GERONIMO HAVE MUCH FUN!
YES, BUT NOT WHITE MAN!
GERONIMO NOW MADE RAID AFTER RAID ON THE WHITE MEN. SOON NOTHING WAS SAFE FROM HIS MARAUDING BAND...
GERONIMO! WE'RE DONE FOR!
I'LL OUTRUN THESE...UNH!
STOP! TAKE EVERYTHING YOU CAN AND HURRY!
HO, ME WANT LEATHER PANTS AND SHIRT FROM DRIVER!
ME WANT GUN AN' AMMUNITION!
4

SOON HE BEGAN TO FORGET THAT HE RAIDED FOR VENGEANCE AND SLOWLY HE BEGAN TO TURN INTO A MURDEROUS KILLER WITH AN IMPLACABLE HATRED FOR THE WHITE MAN..

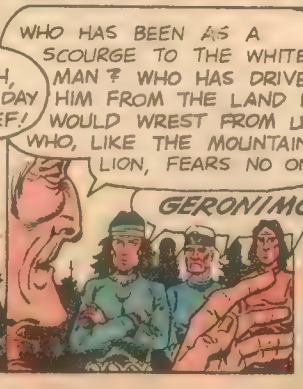
TAKING THE SCALPS FROM THE DEAD THE WILD APACHES HOLD AN ORGY OF LOOTING..

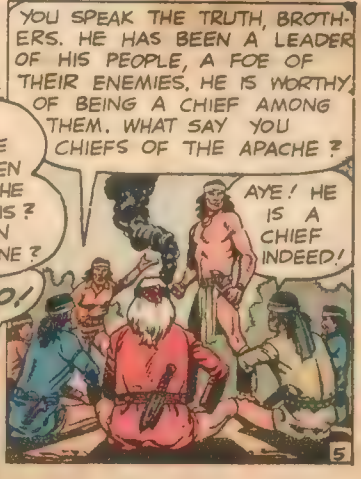
ALL ARE DEAD. THERE ARE NONE LEFT TO TELL OF WHAT HAPPENED.
THEN THE LESSON IS WELL TAUGHT. TAKE WHAT YOU WISH FROM THE WAGONS. THEY ARE YOURS!

SQUAW MUCH LIKE WHITE GIRL DRESS! SHE MAKE PLENTY GOOD COOKING NOW!
HO, HO, ME LOOK FOR FIREWATER. HAVE PLENTY GOOD TIME.
BETTER YOU LOOK FOR GUN AND AMMUNITION! WE WILL NEED IT!

THE BRAVE WAS RIGHT. SEVERAL MONTHS LATER AT A GRAND COUNCIL MEETING OF THE APACHE..

WE HAVE DONE WELL, WE GET MUCH FOR THIS FROM OUTLAWS. THEN WE BUY ALL GUNS AND BULLETS WE NEED. WITH THOSE WHITE MAN IS FINISHED.
YOU SPEAK TRUTH, GERONIMO, SOME DAY YOU BE CHIEF!


WHO HAS BEEN AS A SCOURGE TO THE WHITE MAN? WHO HAS DRIVEN HIM FROM THE LAND HE WOULD WREST FROM US? WHO, LIKE THE MOUNTAIN LION, FEARS NO ONE?
GERONIMO!


YOU SPEAK THE TRUTH, BROTHERS. HE HAS BEEN A LEADER OF HIS PEOPLE, A FOE OF THEIR ENEMIES. HE IS WORTHY OF BEING A CHIEF AMONG THEM. WHAT SAY YOU CHIEFS OF THE APACHE?
AYE! HE IS A CHIEF INDEED!

WELCOME, GERONIMO, TO LEADERSHIP IN YOUR TRIBE. MAY YOU PROTECT THE CHIRACAHUA WITH THE STRENGTH OF THE LION, THE KEENESS OF EAGLE AND THE WISDOM OF THE OWL.
I AM HONORED. I WOULD HAVE THE APACHE MULTIPLY LIKE THE SANDS OF THE DESERT AND DRIVE FROM THE LAND THE WHITE MAN WHO MOLEST THEM...
NOW A LEADER, GERONIMO WANTED POWER. HE DEVISED A BOLD PLAN TO OBTAIN THE NEEDED GUNS AND AMMUNITION THAT WOULD GET IT FOR HIM...
SOON WE HAVE THE WEAPONS WE NEED TO KILL THE WHITE MAN! SOON THE APACHE ARE AS STRONG AS THEY. LOOK, THEY COME!
APACHES! WE'RE ATTACKED!
BLAST THEM! THEY MUSTN'T GET THE AMMUN!... UNHH!
KILL ALL OF THEM! THEY MUST NOT REACH THE FORT TO TELL OF WHAT HAPPENED. LET NONE ESCAPE!
YIPAHH! ATTACK!
YOU DIRTY APACHE RATTLER, I'LL BLOW YOUR... AAGH!
UNNH!
YOU RED DEVILS, STAND BACK OR.. AAHH!
TEN MINUTES LATER...
HO! NOW WE HAVE THE GUNS WE NEED! NOW WE FIGHT THE WHITE MAN ON HIS OWN GROUND! NOW HE WILL NEVER TAKE US!
YES, THE APACHE WILL WIN!
USA
6

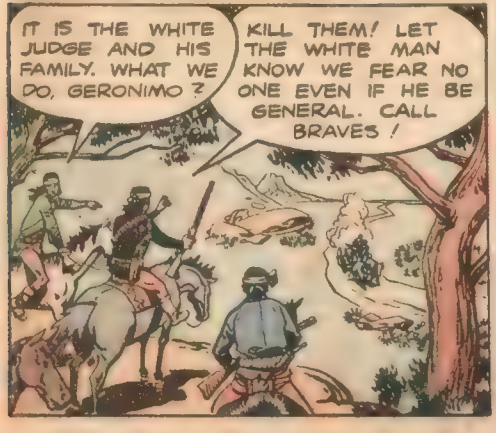
AFTER MONTHS OF SUCH TERRIBLE WARFARE GERONIMO WAS AT LAST SURROUNDED BY COLONEL BRIDEWELL IN THE RINCON MOUNTAINS. IT LOOKED LIKE THE END...
GERONIMO, I DEMAND YOUR SURRENDER OR WE'LL WIPE YOU OUT!
VERY WELL. WHAT YOU DO WITH US?
WE TAKE YOU TO THE SAN CARLOS RESERVATION. THEY'LL DECIDE WHAT TO DO WITH YOU THERE.
VERY WELL, ME GO. I DO NO WRONG. THEY CANNOT HURT US!
TWO DAYS LATER...
DO NOT WORRY, MUSKEZ, WE DO NOT STAY LONG. YOU WAIT AND SEE. THEY CANNOT KEEP US!
I HOPE YOU ARE RIGHT, GERONIMO. I WOULD DIE HERE.
THE TRIAL OF GERONIMO BEGAN AND FOR THREE MONTHS IT WENT ON UNTIL...
I AM SORRY, GENTLEMEN, BUT THERE ISN'T A SHRED OF ACTUAL EVIDENCE AGAINST GERONIMO, WE HAVE TO LET HIM GO!
WHAT! HE'LL START HIS RAIDS AND KILLING AGAIN! YOU CAN'T!
THERE IS NOTHING I CAN DO. THERE IS NO ONE LEFT ALIVE TO TESTIFY AGAINST HIM AND HIS MEN. BRING IN GERONIMO.
THIS IS AN OUTRAGE... I'LL WRITE WASHINGTON ABOUT THIS!
MOMENTS LATER...
YOU ARE FREE, GERONIMO, YOU MAY RETURN TO YOUR MEN, BUT REMEMBER, WE SHALL WATCH YOU AND THE SLIGHTEST MISTEP WILL BRING SWIFT PUNISHMENT. THAT IS ALL.
IT IS AS I SAID. YOU CANNOT HOLD ME. THE APACHE HAVE DONE NO WRONG.
SO ONCE AGAIN THE EVIL APACHE WAS ABLE TO RAID AGAIN, BUT EVEN AS HE REJOINED HIS MEN AN ENRAGED PEOPLE DEMANDED AID FROM WASHINGTON AND GOT IT...
GENERAL CROOK, I APPOINT YOU COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF OF THE ARIZONA DISTRICT WITH PARTICULAR ORDERS TO TAKE CARE OF THAT SAVAGE.... GERONIMO!
YES SIR, I UNDERSTAND. I WILL LEAVE AT ONCE!
THE WAR WAS ON IN EARNEST...

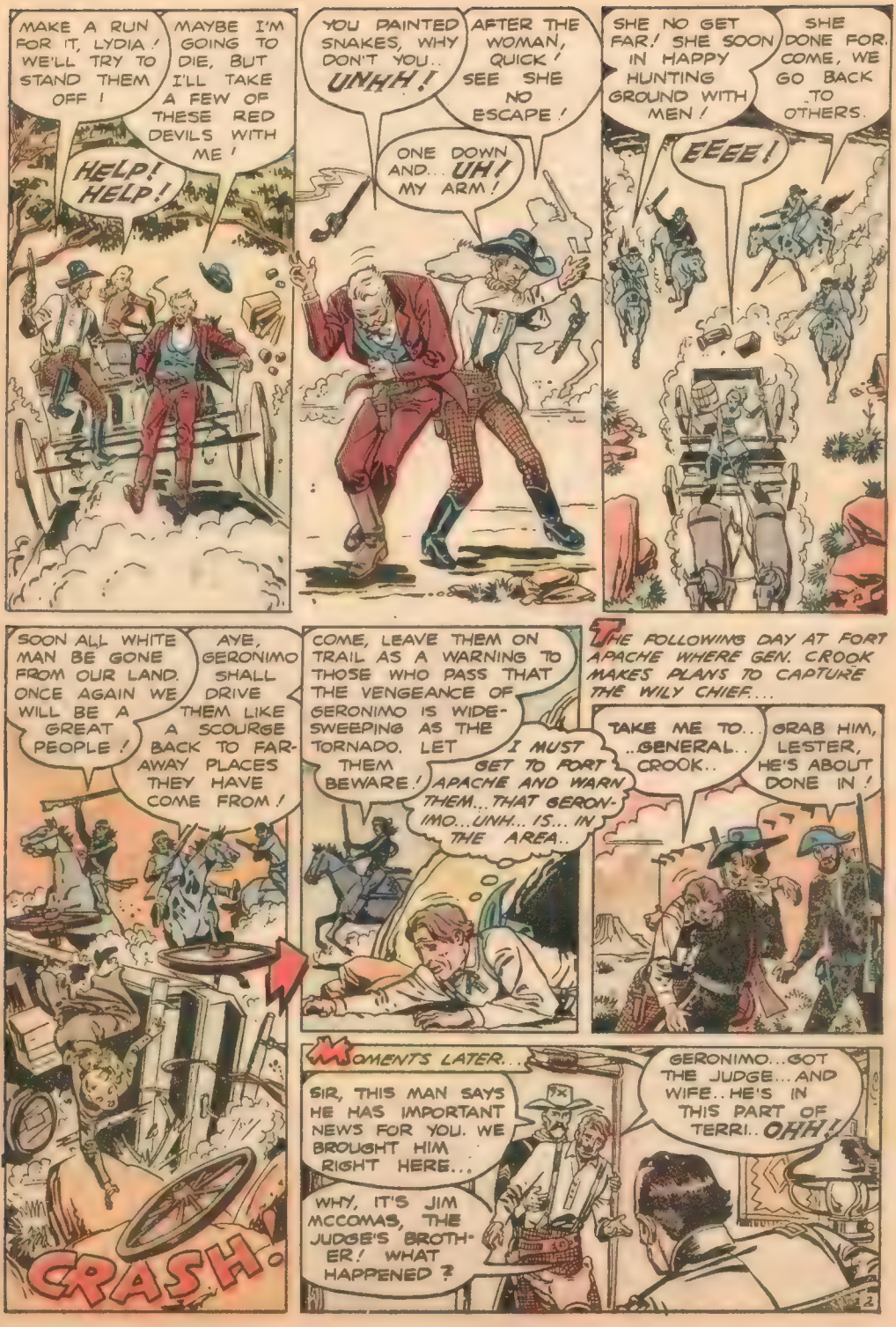
GERONIMO AND THE CRAWFORD EXPEDITION

HO, SOON THE WHITE MAN FIGHTS WHITE MAN. EACH THINK THE OTHER BEGAN THE FIGHT. THEY SOON KILL EVERYONE.
GERONIMO MUCH SMART. HIS WILES ARE AS CUNNING AS THE COYOTE!
JOE Maneely

FREE AGAIN, THE DEADLY GERONIMO BEGAN LIVING UP TO HIS EVIL REPUTATION AS "THE WORST INDIAN WHO EVER LIVED." HIS CUNNING, BLOODTHIRSTINESS AND VENGEANCE-DRIVEN CRUELTY WERE AS A BOTTOMLESS PIT. WITH THE ARMY IN FULL PURSUIT OF HIMSELF AND HIS WARRIORS HE MANAGED ONCE AGAIN TO PULL AN ACT OF TREACHEROUS MALEVOLENCE THAT REACHED AN ALL TIME LOW.....

JANUARY 11, 1884 AT THOMPSON'S CANYON, NEAR THE GILA RIVER AS JUDGE H.C. McCOMAS, HIS WIFE AND BROTHER RIDE TOWARD SILVER CITY..


IT IS THE WHITE JUDGE AND HIS FAMILY. WHAT WE DO, GERONIMO?
KILL THEM! LET THE WHITE MAN KNOW WE FEAR NO ONE EVEN IF HE BE GENERAL. CALL BRAVES!

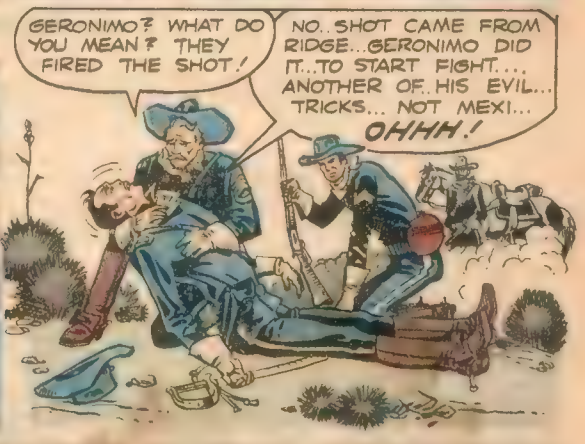

MAKE A RUN FOR IT, LYDIA! WE'LL TRY TO STAND THEM OFF!
MAYBE I'M GOING TO DIE, BUT I'LL TAKE A FEW OF THESE RED DEVILS WITH ME!
HELP! HELP!
YOU PAINTED SNAKES, WHY DON'T YOU.. UNHH!
AFTER THE WOMAN, QUICK! SEE SHE NO ESCAPE!
ONE DOWN AND... UH! MY ARM!
SHE NO GET FAR! SHE SOON IN HAPPY HUNTING GROUND WITH MEN!
SHE DONE FOR. COME, WE GO BACK TO OTHERS.
EEEE!
SOON ALL WHITE MAN BE GONE FROM OUR LAND. ONCE AGAIN WE WILL BE A GREAT PEOPLE!
AYE, GERONIMO SHALL DRIVE THEM LIKE A SCOURGE BACK TO FAR-AWAY PLACES THEY HAVE COME FROM!
CRASH.
COME, LEAVE THEM ON TRAIL AS A WARNING TO THOSE WHO PASS THAT THE VENGEANCE OF GERONIMO IS WIDE-SWEEPING AS THE TORNADO. LET THEM BEWARE!
I MUST GET TO FORT APACHE AND WARN THEM... THAT GERONIMO... UNH... IS... IN THE AREA..
THE FOLLOWING DAY AT FORT APACHE WHERE GEN. CROOK MAKES PLANS TO CAPTURE THE WILY CHIEF...
TAKE ME TO... ..GENERAL.. CROOK..
GRAB HIM, LESTER, HE'S ABOUT DONE IN!
MOMENTS LATER...
SIR, THIS MAN SAYS HE HAS IMPORTANT NEWS FOR YOU. WE BROUGHT HIM RIGHT HERE...
WHY, IT'S JIM MCCOMAS, THE JUDGE'S BROTHER! WHAT HAPPENED?
GERONIMO... GOT THE JUDGE... AND WIFE.. HE'S IN THIS PART OF TERRI.. OHH!

GET HIM TO THE HOSPITAL IMMEDIATELY! I'LL TALK TO HIM LATER.. COSTER, GET ME CAPTAIN CRAWFORD, HURRY.
YES, SIR!
GOT THEM...KILLED.. LYDIA...BUT DIDN'T GET ME...I FOOLED 'EM...I FOOL-UNH!
LATER..
THIS IS SERIOUS. JUDGE McCOMAS WAS AN IMPORTANT MAN AND THERE WILL BE TROUBLE... CRAWFORD, TAKE THREE COMPANIES AND GET GERONIMO. THE SCOUTS MAY STILL BE ABLE TO PICK UP HIS TRAIL.
YES, SIR. WE'LL BE READY TO LEAVE FIRST THING IN THE MORNING.
THE NEXT DAY CRAWFORD LEAVES WITH HIS MEN IN AN ALL-OUT SEARCH FOR THE EVIL APACHE...
F-O-O-R-W-A-R-D!
SO ONCE AGAIN THEY GO AFTER GERONIMO. HE WILL BE GLAD TO KNOW THIS!
WHITE MAN WOULD GIVE PLENTY TO KNOW GERONIMO IN SIERRAS ONLY TWENTY MILES AWAY. BUT, WHITE MAN FOOL. HE CANNOT EVEN FOLLOW OWN NOSE! HO!
THAT NIGHT..
EVEN NOW THE WHITE SOLDIERS SCOUR THE HILLS FOR GERONIMO. THEY ARE MANY AND THEY SEEK YOUR CAPTURE.
IT IS GOOD YOU TELL ME THIS. I WILL MAKE THE WHITE SOLDIER SORRY THEY LEAVE FORT.
WE MAKE WHITE MAN GO TO HIS OWN DOOM. MEXICANS ALSO SEARCH THE HILLS FOR US. THEY SHALL FIGHT EACH OTHER!
YOUR WISDOM IS TOO GREAT FOR US. TELL US THE CUNING THOUGHTS YOU POSSESS, OH CHIEF!
A PARTY OF BRAVES SHALL MAKE A FALSE TRAIL THAT WILL LEAD THE MEXICANS TO THE AMERICANS AND THE AMERICANS TO THE MEXICANS. THEN WE SHALL SEE!
AYE! AYE!
I STILL DO NOT UNDERSTAND, GERONIMO, BUT YOU, WHOSE WORD IS LIKE THE SERPENT'S STING, HAVE SPOKEN. IT IS ENOUGH!
3

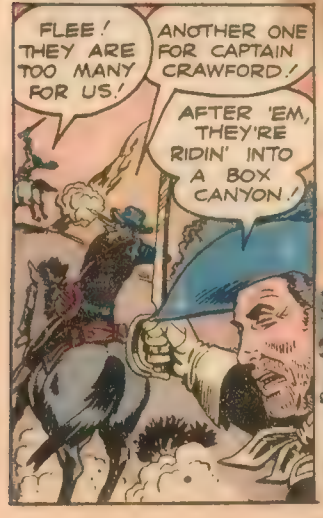
THE NEXT DAY GERONIMO AND HIS BRAVES MAKE A FALSE TRAIL LEADING TOWARD THE MEXICAN CAMP...
LEAVE THE EMBERS SO THE SOLDIERS WILL FIND THEM STILL WARM AND THINK WE CAMPED HERE.
WE HAVE LEFT BROKEN BRANCHES, HORSE FOOTPRINTS FOR MANY MILES. THEY CANNOT FAIL TO SEE THEM.
BY TOMORROW THEY WILL COME. THEN WE SHALL WATCH AND SEE THEM DESTROY EACH OTHER.
MUCH RATHER WOULD I RIDE AMONG THEM MYSELF AND COLLECT THEIR SCALPS!
BE SILENT. IF IT HAPPENS AS GERONIMO SAYS, THE LOOT WILL BE GREAT.
EARLY ON THE MORNING OF JANUARY 18, THE TWO SEARCHING PARTIES MEET-EACH THINKING THE OTHERS APACHES...
SOON WE HIT THEES GERONIMO AND HEES SAVAGES, THEN WE END HEES MISERABLE LIFE...POOF! LIKE THAT!
LOOK! EET EES THEM!
FIRE! LET NOT ONE OF THEES KILLERS ESCAPE!
NOW I REVENGE MYSELF FOR ALL THEIR KILLINGS. NOW I KEEL THEM!
APACHES! TAKE COVER!
CAPTAIN CRAWFORD, QUICK TO SIZE UP THE SITUATION, TRIES TO STOP THE BATTLE...
HOLD YOUR FIRE, MEN. IT'S MEXICANS. THEY THINK WE'RE APACHES. I'M GOING OUT AND STOP THE SHOOTING.
WATCH OUT, SIR. THOSE MEX' SOLDIERS ARE TRIGGER HAPPY.
DON'T SHOOT! WE ARE NOT APACHES! WE'RE AMERICANS! HOLD YOUR FIRE!
NO TIRAN! STOP YOUR SHOOTING! STOP!
BUT THE TREACHEROUS GERONIMO HAD FORESEEN THE MEETING AND ON A NEARBY RIDGE...
SO THEY STOP. NOW WE BEGIN THE FIGHT AGAIN... SHOOT THE CAPTAIN!
UGH! ME GET! HIS SCALP IS MINE!
NOW I UNDERSTAND THE GREAT CHIEF'S PLAN. GOOD!
4

DON'T LET A SINGLE ONE LIVE. THEY CAN'T GET AWAY WITH THIS!
WIPE THEM OUT, THE TREACHEROUS DOGS!
SEE, THE WHITE MAN DESTROYS THE WHITE MAN WHILE WE SIT AT OUR EASE. COME, IT IS TIME TO GO.

MOMENTS LATER THE MEXICANS FLEE AND THE MEN REACH CRAWFORD WHO IS DYING...


GERONIMO? WHAT DO YOU MEAN? THEY FIRED THE SHOT!
NO..SHOT CAME FROM RIDGE...GERONIMO DID IT...TO START FIGHT.... ANOTHER OF HIS EVIL... TRICKS... NOT MEXI...
OHHH!

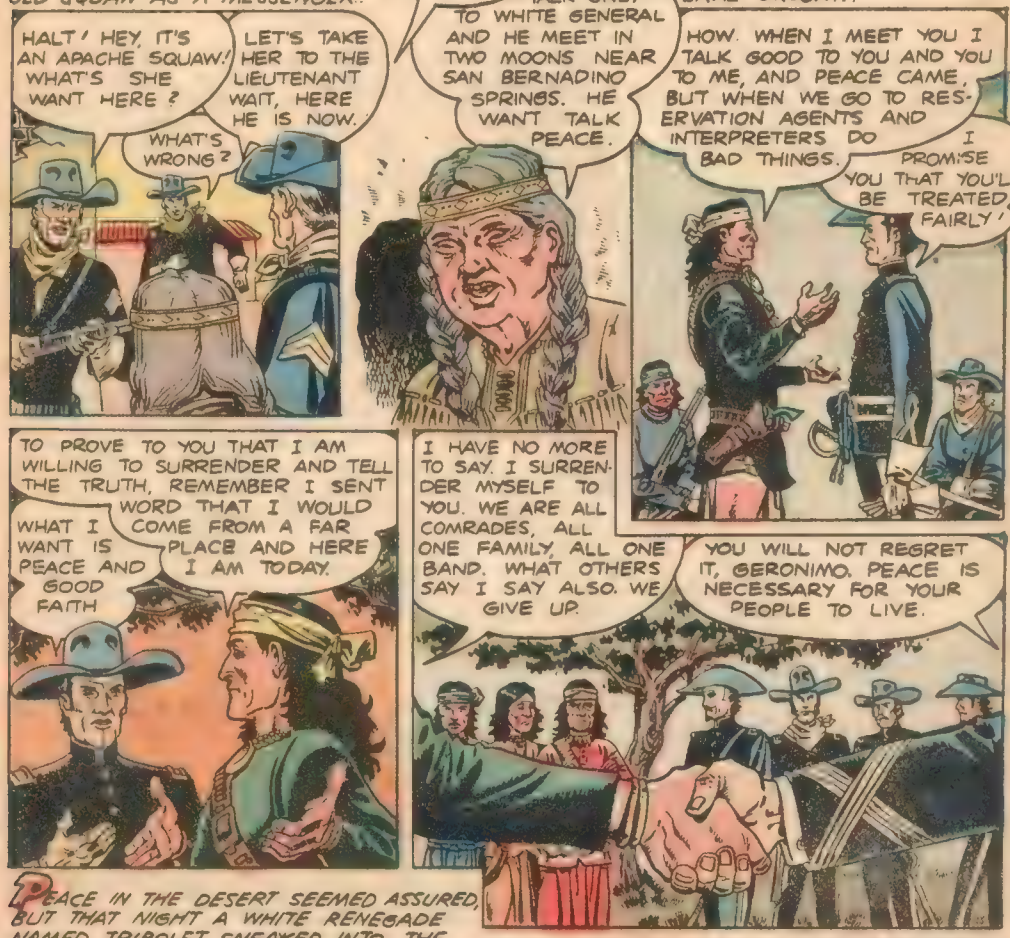
FURIOUS, THE AMERICANS CONTINUED THEIR PURSUIT OF GERONIMO...



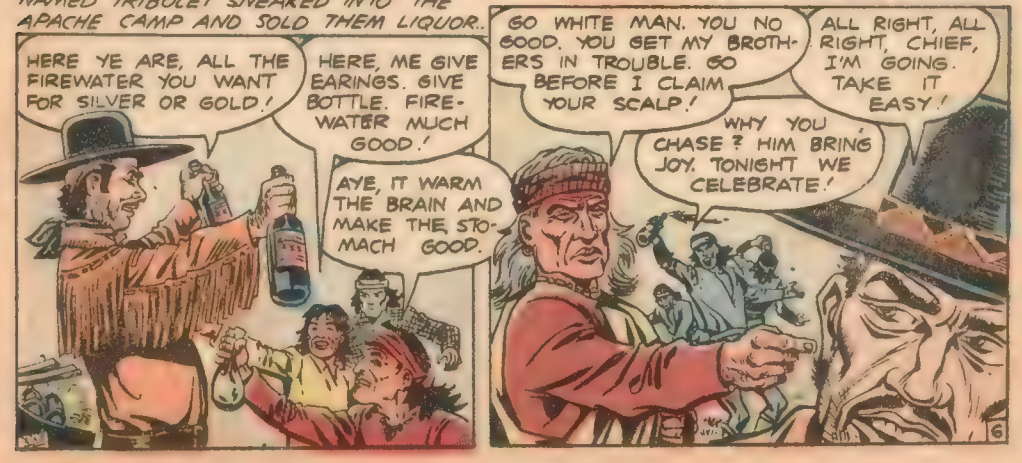
THAT TAKES CARE OF THIS BUNCH, BUT WE STILL DIDN'T GET GERONIMO...HE'S ON THE RUN!
YEP, HE'S BEGINNING TO FEEL HIS LOSSES. HE'LL BE WILLIN' TO TALK TURKEY SOON.

GERONIMO NO LIKE THIS. HE COME BACK AND GET REVENGE!
I GUESS WE GOT EVERY ONE OF THE DEVILS, THEY'LL LARN THEY CAN'T FOOL WITH UNITED STATES CAVALRY!
SHORE WILL, BUT THIS FIGHTIN' AIN'T GONNA STOP UNTIL THEY GIT GERONIMO, HE'S THE INSTIGATOR.

With the soldiers hot on his trail, Geronimo thought it expedient to talk of surrendering again. He sent an old squaw as a messenger.


HALT! HEY, IT'S AN APACHE SQUAW! WHAT'S SHE WANT HERE?
LET'S TAKE HER TO THE LIEUTENANT WAIT, HERE HE IS NOW.
WHAT'S WRONG?
WHAT DO YOU WANT HERE, WOMAN?
GERONIMO SEND MESSAGE. HE SAY HE TALK ONLY TO WHITE GENERAL AND HE MEET IN TWO MOONS NEAR SAN BERNADINO SPRINGS. HE WANT TALK PEACE.
Accordingly, on March 25th a meeting took place at the Canyon des Embudos between Geronimo and General Crook...
HOW. WHEN I MEET YOU I TALK GOOD TO YOU AND YOU TO ME, AND PEACE CAME, BUT WHEN WE GO TO RESERVATION AGENTS AND INTERPRETERS DO BAD THINGS.
I PROMISE YOU THAT YOU'LL BE TREATED FAIRLY!
TO PROVE TO YOU THAT I AM WILLING TO SURRENDER AND TELL THE TRUTH, REMEMBER I SENT WORD THAT I WOULD COME FROM A FAR PLACE AND HERE I AM TODAY.
WHAT I WANT IS PEACE AND GOOD FAITH
I HAVE NO MORE TO SAY. I SURRENDER MYSELF TO YOU. WE ARE ALL COMRADES, ALL ONE FAMILY, ALL ONE BAND. WHAT OTHERS SAY I SAY ALSO. WE GIVE UP.
YOU WILL NOT REGRET IT, GERONIMO. PEACE IS NECESSARY FOR YOUR PEOPLE TO LIVE.

Peace in the desert seemed assured, but that night a white renegade named Tribolet sneaked into the Apache camp and sold them liquor..


HERE YE ARE, ALL THE FIREWATER YOU WANT FOR SILVER OR GOLD!
HERE, ME GIVE EARINGS. GIVE BOTTLE. FIREWATER MUCH GOOD!
AYE, IT WARM THE BRAIN AND MAKE THE STOMACH GOOD.
GO WHITE MAN. YOU NO GOOD. YOU GET MY BROTHERS IN TROUBLE. GO BEFORE I CLAIM YOUR SCALP!
ALL RIGHT, ALL RIGHT, CHIEF, I'M GOING. TAKE IT EASY!
WHY YOU CHASE? HIM BRING JOY. TONIGHT WE CELEBRATE!

HO, ARE WE NOT AS STRONG AS THE MOUNTAINS? CAN WE NOT DEFEAT ANY WHO COME AGAINST US? WHY DO WE SURRENDER TO THE WHITE MAN?
YEEIPPEE! WE NO SURRENDER! WE ARE STRONG!
THIS IS BAD MEDICINE
HO, GERONIMO, HAVE YOU BECOME AN OLD WOMAN THAT YOU SURRENDER SO QUICKLY?
AYE, WHAT HAS BECOME OF THE STRONG GERONIMO, HAS HE BECOME BUT A SQUAW THAT HE SURRENDERS?
SHORTLY AFTER AT CROOK'S CAMP
YOU MUST BRING YOUR MEN BEFORE THEY LEAVE. THE FIREWATER WILL HAVE THEM ON THE WARPATH SOON. I AM SICK OF WAR AND WOULD SEE PEACE.
THANK YOU, CHIEF.... COXON, CALL THE MEN! GET TELFORD!
MINUTES LATER..
TOP SPEED MEN, OR WE MAY BE TOO LATE. FORWARD!
THAT BLASTED TRIBOLET OUGHT TO HANG FOR THIS! MEN LIKE HIM ARE WORSE THAN THE INDIANS EVER WERE!
BUT EVEN AS CROOK LEFT, GERONIMO AND HIS APACHES WERE FLEEING INTO THE MOUNTAINS READY TO FIGHT AGAIN..
YEAAH! EEYIPP!
I HAVE BEEN BLIND. ONCE MORE WILL THE WHITE MAN FEEL THE WEIGHT OF MY BLOWS. I WILL NOT SURRENDER!
IT IS GOOD! GERONIMO IS HIMSELF ONCE MORE!
WHEN CROOK ARRIVED..
GONE. ALL GONE AND WITH PEACE IN OUR HANDS. BECAUSE OF ONE GREEDY FOOL MANY WILL DIE!
IT WAS NOT YOUR FAULT, SIR. YOU COULD NOT HAVE DONE ANYTHING. YOU MUST TRY AGAIN. NEXT TIME YOU'LL GET HIM.
BUT THERE WAS TO BE NO NEXT TIME FOR CROOK. TWO WEEKS LATER HE WAS RELIEVED OF HIS COMMAND AND GENERAL NELSON A. MILES PUT IN HIS PLACE WHILE GERONIMO ROAMED THE HILLS TO COMMIT NEW AND HORRIBLE CRIMES..
YEEIPPAH!
AHHEEYAH!

THE TEXAS RANGER

ALL THE WORLD HATES A **TRAITOR!**--AND **CLINT CORTLAND, TEXAS RANGER**, WAS NO EXCEPTION! INTO THE JAWS OF DEATH, INTO THE HEART OF COMANCHELAND, WENT CLINT CORTLAND, ON THE TRAIL OF THE SNAKE KNOWN AS.....

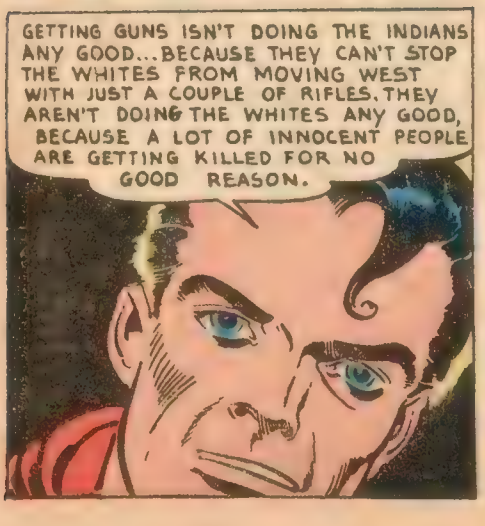
THE WHITE COMANCHE

THIS CAN'T GO ON FOREVER! - SOONER OR LATER THEY'LL GET BRAVE ENOUGH TO RUSH....AND THEN CLINT CORTLAND'LL BE BITING THE DUST!
BUT IF SOME RAT HADN'T GOT GUNS TO THESE DANGED COMNANCHES, I WOULDN'T HAVE TO GO ON A DUST DIET AT ALL!
SOMETHING'S UP!..THEY'RE VAMOOSING!-BUT WHY?
RANGERS!...HOW IN SAM HILL DID THEY KNOW I WAS PRAYING FOR JUST THIS TO HAPPEN!
CLINT! ARE YOU ALL RIGHT?
YOU SURE LIVE UP TO YOUR NAME, PRONTO! IF YOU'D BEEN A LITTLE LESS "PRONTO," MY HEAD WOULD BE DANGLING FROM GREY LIGHTNING'S SADDLE RIGHT NOW.

I LEARNED FROM FRIEND IN GREY LIGHTNING TRIBE THAT THEY GET NEW GUNS. I LEARN FROM BOSS YOU INVESTIGATE GREY LIGHTNING COUNTRY!-IT ADD UP TO CLINT'S HEAD...WHETHER IT STAY ON OR COME OFF!
THANK THE LORD YOU'RE GOOD IN MATH, PRONTO!..I LIKE YOUR KIND OF ADDITION!

THANK PRONTO FOR US GETTIN' HERE IN TIME, CLINT! PRONTO'S GOT A BIG EAR WHEN IT COMES TO HEARIN' OF GUN-RUNNIN'!
I ALREADY THANKED PRONTO, BOSS! IT'S YOUR TURN NOW.

TUSH! 'TWARN'T NOTHIN'! NOW THAT YOU'RE SAFE...DID YOU FIND OUT WHO'S BACK O'THIS GUN-RUNNIN'?
NOTHING MORE'N IT'S A WHITE MAN WHOSE MAKING BLOOD MONEY...


GETTING GUNS ISN'T DOING THE INDIANS ANY GOOD...BECAUSE THEY CAN'T STOP THE WHITES FROM MOVING WEST WITH JUST A COUPLE OF RIFLES. THEY AREN'T DOING THE WHITES ANY GOOD, BECAUSE A LOT OF INNOCENT PEOPLE ARE GETTING KILLED FOR NO GOOD REASON.

THIS SKUNK KNOWS EVERY MOVE THE RANGERS'RE MAKING...HE'S LEARNIN' THINGS FROM INSIDE!
SOUNDS IMPOSSIBLE! WONDER WHO COULD BE DEVIL ENOUGH TO DO IT?

THAT'S EXACTLY WHAT I AIN'T RESTING UNTIL I FIND OUT ABOUT!
TOO BAD, VULTURE FOOD, YOU AIN'T GOT SOME TASTY COMPANY!
AN HOUR LATER, AT RANGER'S HEADQUARTERS
AIN'T YOU ACOMIN' IN TO MAKE YOUR REPORT, CLINT?
LATER, SAM. ME AN PRONTO GOT A LOT OF GROUND TO COVER...
YOU SAY THIS COMANCHE FRIEND OF YOURS CAN IDENTIFY THE TRAITOR?
THAT'S WHAT HE SAY. WE MUST GIVE COMANCHE NICE GIFT FOR WHAT HE TELL..
THERE HE IS NOW... AT BAR. COME!
YOU AMAZE ME, PRONTO... WHERE'D YOU GET THE COWBOY GEAR TO DISGUISE HIM?
MEANWHILE, A SHADOWY FIGURE CLIMBS THE SIDE STAIRCASE OF THE SALOON.

HERE'S HALF OF THE MONEY NOW. SOON AS YOU TELL PRONTO WHO'S DOING THE RUNNING, YOU GET THE OTHER HALF. SAVVY?
WELL, WHAT BINDS YOUR TONGUE?... SPEAK!
JUST AS THE COMANCHE INFORMER IS ABOUT TO WHISPER THE NAME OF THE TRAITOR...
BANG
GREAT SCOTT!
THE SHOTS CAME FROM UP HERE!
WATCH YOURSELF, CLINT! HE IS FINE SHOT!

REMEMBER, I'M COMING IN SHOOTING!
CURSE IT! THE KILLER'S GONE!
BUT AN AUTOPSY, RUDE AND PRIMITIVE, REVEALS A CLUE!...
TAKE A LOOK AT ONE OF THESE BULLETS WHICH KILLED THE COMANCHE, SAM! THAT BULLET CAME FROM A RANGER'S GUN!
DANGED IF IT DON'T!
NO TIME TO LOSE, SAM! ROUND UP ALL THE RANGERS AT ONCE!..ONE GUN BARREL'S GOT TO BE STILL HOT..AND THE MAN WHO OWNS IT IS THE GUN RUNNER!
WHEN I KNOW HIM, I'LL KILL HIM WITH MY OWN HANDS!
MINUTES LATER..
EVERYBODY HERE, SAM?
NOPE! MORT MEAGHER'S MISSING. HE'S LIT OUT ON HIS HORSE, FRANK SAYS, 'BOUT TEN MINUTES AGO!
NONE OF THESE MEN GOT A GUN WITH A HOT BARREL. KNOW WHAT I'M THINKIN' ABOUT MEAGHER?
YOU BET! PRONTO AND ME ARE BRINGING MEAGHER IN..IF NECESSARY, PIECE BY PIECE! - RIGHT, PRONTO?
RIGHT.

THAT EVENING, MANY MILES AWAY..
THEY WERE BOUND TO FIND OUT! NOW GREY LIGHTNING'S GOT TO HELP ME..LIKE I HELPED HIM!
THIS TORCH IS OUR SIGNAL. GREY LIGHTNING'S BRAVES WILL RESPECT IT AND LET ME PASS INTO THE CAMP!
IT'S YOUR FRIEND...MEAGHER! I COME TO SPEAK WITH GREY LIGHTNING.
WELL, WHITE HOUND, WHAT YOU WANT WITH ME? YOU KNOW WHEN GUNS COME?
NOT EXACTLY, GREY LIGHTNING. NOT NOW. ER-THE RANGERS KNOW WHAT I'M DOING.
AT THE SAME TIME, NOT TOO FAR AWAY...
SILENTLY, CLINT! WE'RE IN GREY LIGHTNING'S COUNTRY. -TAKE OFF YOUR CLOTHING QUICKLY..IN A SECOND I'LL MAKE A COMANCHE OUT OF YOU!....
HMM..I DON'T LIKE BEING A COMANCHE EVEN FOR A SECOND!
NOT ALL COMANCHE LIKE GREY LIGHTNING, CLINT! SOME DAY, ALL INDIANS WILL BE PEACEFUL.

I'M STARTING TO MISS YOU ALREADY, PRONTO!
DON'T WORRY, CLINT... I'LL BE NEAR YOU, THOUGH YOU MAY NOT RECOGNIZE ME!
SO YOU ARE NO MORE USE TO US, EH, MEAGHER? NO MORE GUNS, EH?-TOO BAD FOR YOU. I'VE ALWAYS WANTED TO ROAST YOU ALIVE!
R-ROAST M-ME ALIVE! YOU'RE N-NOT SERIOUS! I CAME HERE FOR HELP!
HERE'S HELP.... INTO THE FIRE!
YEOWW
THE WHITE DOG SQUEALS! HA!!
NO! N-NO! YOU CAN'T DO THIS! I HELPED YOU! I STOLE GUNS FOR YOU!-NO!
THEN WHY DO YOU COMPLAIN? WE ARE PAYING YOU FOR IT! NO?
CLINT, DISGUISED AS A COMANCHE, WATCHES THE GRUESOME PROCEDURE...
MEAGHER! BEING BURNED ALIVE!... GREY LIGHTNING MUST KNOW MEAGHER'S USEFULNESS IS OVER! I CAN'T LET A HUMAN BEING GO THROUGH SUCH TORTURE, EVEN IF HE IS MEAGHER!
8

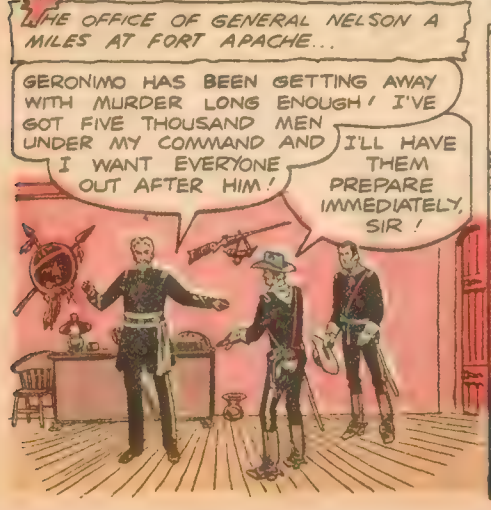
AI!..WHO DARES SPOIL MY PLEASURE?
OHHHHHH....
SIEZE THAT FOOL! HE HAS GONE MAD!
NOW I'M GOING TO SPOIL ALL YOUR PLEASURE, GREY LIGHTNING!
BANG!
AGHHH!
BETTER MAKE A BREAK FOR IT, CLINT LAD...THEY DON'T LIKE YOU AROUND HERE! THEY WON'T BE CONFUSED FOREVER BY YOUR DISGUISE!
CARVING WOOD'S LESS HARMFUL, BROTHER!
IT'S GOOD THEY'RE SUCH ROTTEN SHOTS!
BANG!
D-DONE FOR! C-CAUGHT FLATFOOTED....
9

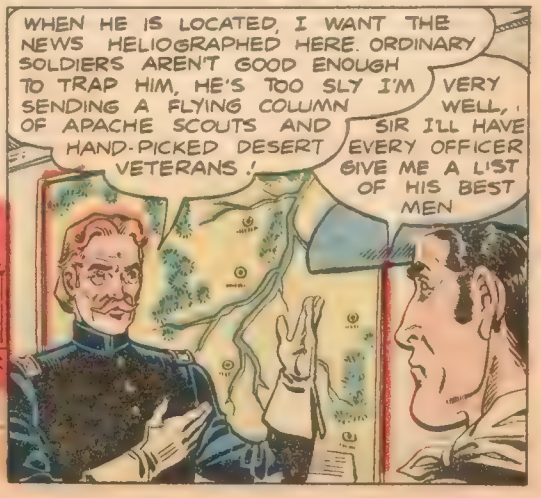
IT'S THE SECOND BLOOMING MIRACLE THAT'S HAPPENED TO ME!..WHO FIRED THOSE SHOTS?
AAGGHH
BANG BANG
COME ON, CLINT! WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR?
PRONTO: I MIGHT'VE KNOWN IT WAS YOU!
OHHHH..
SOME SHOOTING, PRONTO... REMIND ME TO RECOMMEND YOU TO BE A RANGER!
BANG!
REMIND ME TO RECOMMEND YOU FOR DISMISSAL!..PUTTING YOUR NECK IN THE LION'S MOUTH LIKE THAT.
HA HA!-LET'S BOTH LEAVE OFF RECOMMENDING..ANDGIT!
INCIDENTALLY, I HAPPEN TO KNOW MORT MEAGHER'S DEAD AND SO'S GREY LIGHTNING!...
CLINT, THAT WAS WORTH FIGHTING FOR!
BANG!
BANG!
ZING
THE NEXT MORNING, AFTER THE RANGERS GET THE GOOD NEWS...
CAN'T MAKE UP MY MIND WHETHER TO SHOOT YOU BLASTED COMANCHES ON SIGHT OR NOT.
DON'T DO IT, SAM, WE COMANCHES SIMPLY DETEST THOSE NASTY RANGER BULLETS! - DON'T WE, PRONTO?

GERONIMO

AND THE SAN PEDRO PASS MASSACRE!

GENERAL MILES, CONQUEROR OF THE KIOWAS, THE COMANCHES AND THE SIOUX, WASTED NO TIME IN SENDING EVERY AVAILABLE MAN AFTER GERONIMO IN AN ALL-OUT ATTEMPT TO BRING HIM TO JUSTICE. THROUGH THE WILD AND DESOLATE MOUNTAINS RANGED FIVE THOUSAND PICKED SOLDIERS IN ENDLESS PURSUIT OF THE TREACHEROUS APACHE AND HIS DESPERATE BRAVES WHO USED EVERY MURDEROUS DEVICE THEY COULD THINK OF TO STAVE OFF THE INEVITABLE END OF THEIR CRUEL AND SAVAGE TRAIL.


THE OFFICE OF GENERAL NELSON A MILES AT FORT APACHE...
GERONIMO HAS BEEN GETTING AWAY WITH MURDER LONG ENOUGH! I'VE GOT FIVE THOUSAND MEN UNDER MY COMMAND AND I WANT EVERYONE OUT AFTER HIM!
I'LL HAVE THEM PREPARE IMMEDIATELY, SIR!


WHEN HE IS LOCATED, I WANT THE NEWS HELIOGRAPHED HERE. ORDINARY SOLDIERS AREN'T GOOD ENOUGH TO TRAP HIM, HE'S TOO SLY I'M SENDING A FLYING COLUMN OF APACHE SCOUTS AND HAND-PICKED DESERT VETERANS!
VERY WELL, SIR I'LL HAVE EVERY OFFICER GIVE ME A LIST OF HIS BEST MEN

MEANWHILE GERONIMO, NOT KNOWING OF THE HUNT THAT HAD BEGUN FOR HIM SWEPT BACK ACROSS THE BORDER IN A DARING RAID ON A RICH RANCH.
WHY WE RAID HERE? TOWN HAVE MORE LOOT
HO, NACHITE, YOU ARE A FOOL TOWN HAVE MORE LOOT, BUT HERE THERE ARE MANY HORSES THAT WE NEED!
HOLD! SOON THEY WILL POUR OUT AS RATS FROM A BURNING GRANARY! SAVE YOUR BULLETS TILL THEN BACK!
THEN YOU WILL HAVE YOUR REVENGE. THERE ARE MANY WOMEN AND CHILDREN TO TORTURE!
INSIDE THE RANCHHOUSE..
BLAST IT! NO MORE AMMUNITION! GUESS THAT MESSAGE WE SENT NEVER GOT THROUGH. WE'RE DONE FOR!
ONE! I'M MAKIN' EVERY BULLET COUNT I AIN'T GOT THROUGH YET!
SAVE 'EM, JEB.. THE WOMEN AND CHILDREN A BULLET'LL BE FAR BETTER THAN WHAT THAT COYOTE GERONIMO'LL DO TO 'EM.
YOU'RE RIGHT. THERE AIN'T NO HUMAN STREAK IN THE LIKES OF THAT MANGY RATTLER!
LOOK! LOOK! SOLDIERS!
AS IF A MIRACLE HAD HAPPENED, THE CAVALRY, GUNS BLAZING, POUR DOWN ON THE SURPRISED APACHES...
YEAHAA! SOLDIERS!
THEY COME AS IF BY MAGIC!
FLEE FOR THE HILLS! DO NOT FIGHT HERE OR WE ARE LOST!
AFTER 'EM! KEEP ON THEIR HEELS DON'T GIVE 'EM A MOMENT'S REST. MAYBE WE'VE GOT THE FOX THIS TIME!
THAT WAS MIGHTY CLOSE. I SEEN THE PEARLY GATES THAT TIME!
SO DID I I'M SHORE NOT GONNA MISS ANY PRAYER MEETINS AFTER TODAY.
THE SHREWD GERONIMO LEADS HIS MEN INTO ROCKY COUNTRY WHERE THEY TAKE A STAND AGAINST THE ONCOMING CAVALRY..
NOW LET THEM COME AND WE WIPE THEM OUT THEY NO TAKE US AMONG THESE ROCKS WITH A THOUSAND MEN...NOW LET THEM TASTE OUR LEAD!
3

THEY'RE SPREAD OUT IN THE ROCKS. RUN FOR COVER!
WE RODE RIGHT INTO IT. WE'LL NEVER GET THEM INJUNS OUT OF THERE IN A HUNDRED YEARS!
THEY'VE GOT .UNHH!
IN A MOMENT THE FIELD IS CLEARED, EXCEPT FOR THE GROANING FIGURE OF THE WOUNDED SERGEANT, AND A PITCHED BATTLE IS BEGUN...
OUHHH! HELP ME! HELP...
LOOK AT THAT POOR DEVIL LYING THERE. I CAN'T STAND IT ANY LONGER. I'M GOING AFTER HIM.
YOU CAN'T DO THAT, LIEUTENANT! THEY'LL FILL YOU FULL OF HOLES BEFORE YOU'VE GONE TEN STEPS!
THE YOUNG FOOL! HE'LL NEVER MAKE IT! KEEP SHOOTING AND TRY TO DRAW SOME FIRE FROM HIM.
HE'S A GONER. THEY'LL BE TWO GRAVES OUT HERE TONIGHT.
BUT THE LIEUTENANT, POWHATAN C. CLARKE, JUST OUT OF WEST POINT IS MIRACULOUSLY UNTOUCHED...
ALL RIGHT, SCOTT, I'LL HAVE YOU BACK SAFE IN A MINUTE. THINK YOU HAVE ENOUGH STRENGTH LEFT TO HANG ON TO ME?
I...I'LL TRY, SIR. .I'LL TRY...
JUST A FEW FEET MORE. WE'LL MAKE IT ALL RIGHT. HANG ON!
CAN'T MUCH LONGER...IF I FALL TAKE FLAG AND LEAVE ME.
SECONDS LATER
IT'S A MIRACLE! HOW YOU EVER LIVED THROUGH THAT BARRAGE I'LL NEVER KNOW.
THOSE APACHES MUST BE BLIND TODAY. NOW THAT I'M BACK I SORT OF WONDER MYSELF...WHEW!
BRING SCOTT BACK HERE. HE NEEDS ATTENTION.
SOON AFTER CLARKE'S HEROIC RESCUE, CAPTAIN LEBO, THE TROOP COMMANDER, REALIZES THE FUTILITY OF DEFENDING HIS POSITION...
WITH THOSE BOULDERS TO HELP HIM GERONIMO CAN HOLD OUT LONGER THAN WE CAN. WE'VE GOT TO FALL BACK.
SERGEANT, IS THAT HELIOGRAPH READY?
YES, SIR. WE'VE JUST HAD AN ANSWER FROM CRANDAS STATION.
3

ALL RIGHT, SEND THIS... HAVE GERONIMO IN ACTION. CANNOT POSSIBLY TAKE. AM PULLING BACK. WILL SEND POSITION...
AMAZING INSTRUMENT.
THAT STATION IS TWENTY FIVE MILES AWAY!
TWO HOURS LATER GENERAL MILES RECEIVES THE MESSAGE.
THIS IS WHAT I'VE BEEN WAITING FOR. CAPTAIN LAWTON, YOU WILL LEAVE WITH YOUR FLYING COLUMNS FOR LEBO'S POSITION. KEEP IN TOUCH BY HELIOGRAPH.
YES, SIR
IT'LL TAKE TWO DAYS TO REACH HIM.
GOOD! MEANWHILE LEBO WILL KEEP YOU INFORMED AS TO GERONIMO'S WHEREABOUTS. MY ORDERS TO YOU AND YOUR OFFICERS ARE TO CONTINUE PURSUIT TILL CAPTURE OR UNTIL YOU ARE ASSURED A FRESH COMMAND IS ON THE TRAIL.
YES, SIR!
AS LAWTON AND HIS FLYING COLUMN DASHED TOWARD THE SOUTH ONE OF GERONIMO'S SPIES REACHED THE APACHE CHIEF'S HIDEOUT.
IT IS MASTINEZ! THE SOLDIERS MUST COME AGAIN.
PATIENCE. WE SHALL SOON KNOW.
WHAT NEWS DO YOU BRING, MASTINEZ?
THE WHITE GENERAL PURSUES YOU AND COMES TO THIS CAMP. HOW HE KNOWS WHERE YOU ARE I NO UNDERSTAND.
I NOT CARE. THEY MUST COME THROUGH SAN PEDRO PASS, AND WE LET THEM COME.
ALL THAT DAY AND THROUGH THE NIGHT THE APACHES PREPARE THE DEADLY SURPRISE GERONIMO HAS FOR LAWTON'S FLYING COLUMN...
WHAT? HAS THE LOCO WEED CLAIMED YOU? ONCE THROUGH THE PASS AND THEY CHASE US TO MEXICO!
BUT THEY WILL NEVER GO THROUGH THE PASS. AND THOSE FEW THAT DO NEVER LIVE TO RETURN. CALL THE WARRIORS. THERE IS MUCH TO DO.
GERONIMO, THE MEN ARE WEARY. THEY MUST REST.
NOT UNTIL THEY ARE DONE. WE MUST BE READY WHEN THE SOLDIERS COME.
4

AND NOW TO MAKE CERTAIN THAT THE WHITE MAN DOES COME HERE, WE WILL SEND BAIT NACHITE, YOU AND FIVE BRAVES LEAD THEM HERE..
HO, IT WILL BE MUCH PLEASURE, EVEN BETTER THAN REMAINING HERE
ON THE MORNING OF JULY 30, 1886, AN APACHE SCOUT AT THE HEAD OF LAWTON'S COLUMN SPOTS NACHITE AND HIS MEN.
WE CAN'T BE FAR FROM THE PASS NOW. IF LEBO'S MESSAGES ARE RIGHT WE'VE GOT HIM THIS TIME
HOLD! THERE GERONIMO'S MEN THEY NEAR HERE!
AFTER THEM! THEY'LL LEAD US TO GERONIMO QUICK!
I DON'T LIKE THIS THEM INJUNS ARE TOO SNEAKY TO LET THEMSELVES BE SEEN LIKE THAT
YEP, BUT ORDERS ARE ORDERS.
WITH THE TROOPS IN FULL PURSUIT THE APACHES LEAD THEM THROUGH THE NARROW PASS
HO, THEY COME. IT IS AS I PLANNED. BE READY TO CRUSH THEM WHEN NACHITE REACHES THE OTHER SIDE.
NONE WILL ESCAPE!
NOW! PUSH THE ROCKS OVER!
THEY WILL THINK THE GODS OF THE MOUNTAINS HAVE TAKEN VENGEANCE! YOU GIVE US GOOD SPORT, GERONIMO!
BELOW SUDDEN PANIC REIGNS AS THE DEADLY ROCKFALL TAKES ITS HORRIBLE TOLL
HEAHH! YIPP! AAHHEE!
THOSE AHEAD GO THROUGH! IN THE REAR RETREAT!
KEEP TO THE SIDES! KEEP TO THE SIDES!
5

AS LAWTON RETREATED THE HELIOGRAPH AGAIN WENT INTO ACTION AND ANOTHER COLUMN WAITING BEYOND THE PASS GOES INTO ACTION UNKNOWN TO GERONIMO...

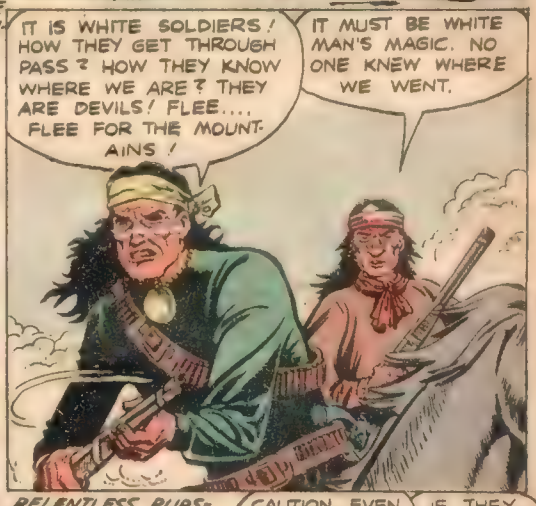
CAPTAIN LAWTON'S TROOP AMBUSHED IN PASS. GERONIMO IN HEIGHTS. APPROACH FROM SOUTH TO TRAP..
SOUND THE BUGLE! TO HORSES! QUICKLY!

MINUTES LATER THE TROOP IS ON ITS WAY..

THIS TIME THAT VARMINT IS GOING TO GET A SURPRISE HE WON'T LIKE.. FULL GALLOP!
RIGHT! HE'S THROUGH. WITH GATEWOOD'S TROOP BELOW HIM, HE'LL NEVER GET THROUGH.

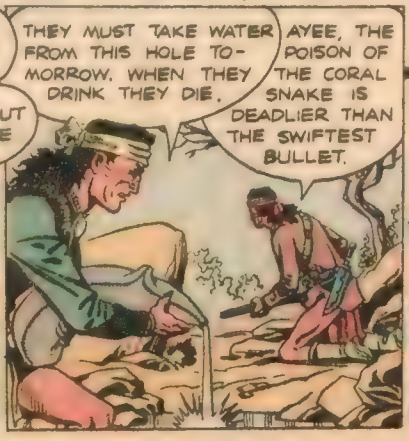
MEANWHILE A SMUG GERONIMO UNAWARE OF THE APPROACHING TROOPS RIDES SOUTHWARD TOWARD THE MEXICAN BORDER...

ONCE MORE WE HAVE PROVED THE SOLDIERS TO BE FOOLS. THEY ARE NO MATCH FOR US. ALWAYS WE WILL WIN.
YOU SPEAK THE TRUTH. THEY WILL FEAR OUR MIGHT AND VENGEANCE... UGH! WHAT COMES?


IT IS WHITE SOLDIERS! HOW THEY GET THROUGH PASS? HOW THEY KNOW WHERE WE ARE? THEY ARE DEVILS! FLEE.... FLEE FOR THE MOUNTAINS!
IT MUST BE WHITE MAN'S MAGIC. NO ONE KNEW WHERE WE WENT.

WHEN BEGAN A RELENTLESS PURSUIT AS GERONIMO TRIED IN EVERY MURDEROUS WAY HE KNEW HOW TO SHAKE THE SOLDIERS FROM HIS TRAIL..

KEEP AFTER THEM. RUN EVERY ONE OF THEM DOWN. THEY MUSTN'T REACH THE BORDER!
I'LL STOP HERE AND HELIOGRAPH A MESSAGE TO GATEWOOD. HE'LL CUT 'EM OFF IN THE SOUTH.


THEY MUST TAKE WATER FROM THIS HOLE TOMORROW. WHEN THEY DRINK THEY DIE.
AYEE, THE POISON OF THE CORAL SNAKE IS DEADLIER THAN THE SWIFTEST BULLET.

But Geronimo's death-dealing trick failed. The Apache scouts spotted the poison...
STOP! DO NOT DRINK! TOUCH NOT THE WATER!
WHAT'S THE MATTER, KA-E-TA? WHAT'S WRONG?
AIN'T NOTHIN' WRONG IN DRINKIN' FROM A WATER-HOLE, IS THERE?
THIS WATER HAS BEEN POISONED! SEE! SEE WHAT HAPPENS TO THE MULE!
WHEW! TO THINK THAT MIGHT'VE BEEN ME!
ALL RIGHT, MEN, WE'LL HAVE TO GO WITHOUT WATER. MOUNT UP!
Finally penned in at the Bavispe River Geronimo could hold out no longer and called for a conference with Lt Gatewood, Ka-E-Ta and Tom Horn...
I SEE YOU, GATEWOOD. WHAT WORD DOES THE GENERAL SEND?
HE SAYS SURRENDER AND YOU WILL BE SENT WITH YOUR PEOPLE TO FLORIDA, THERE TO AWAIT THE DECISION OF THE PRESIDENT.
WE WANT YOUR ADVICE. CONSIDER YOURSELF NOT A WHITE MAN, BUT ONE OF US. WHAT WOULD YOU DO?
TRUST GENERAL MILES AND SURRENDER TO HIM.
WE WOULD HAVE TIL SUNRISE TO THINK.
The next morning Geronimo and his remaining men rode out to meet Lt. Gatewood...
WE HAVE TAKEN YOUR WORD. I AND MY WARRIORS SURRENDER TO GENERAL MILES. WE ARE READY TO GO WITH YOU.
YOU WILL NOT REGRET IT. MANY LIVES HAVE BEEN SAVED.
And so as the Apaches and their captors headed north the long fight was over. Geronimo was through...
I NEVER THOUGHT I'D SEE THE DAY, BUT I GUESS EVERYONE GETS TO THE END OF THE TRAIL AT LAST.
YOU'RE RIGHT. FROM NOW ON ARIZONA TERRITORY WILL GROW AND THRIVE IN PEACE... THE WAR IS OVER!
Geronimo never caused trouble again and died at a ripe old age on the reservation at San Carlos, but his people have never fully surrendered and as late as 1930 there was an Apache outbreak in the Sonoras. Their hate remains...
SOME DAY OUR PEOPLE WILL BE FREE AGAIN. SOME DAY WE WILL HAVE OUR LAND FOR OUR OWN.
BUT MEANTIME WE DIE ON THE RESERVATION. WHAT CAN WE DO AGAINST THE MACHINE GUN AND THE AIRPLANE? NO, GERONIMO, WE MUST KEEP THE PEACE.

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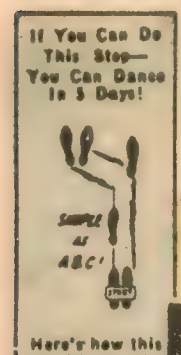
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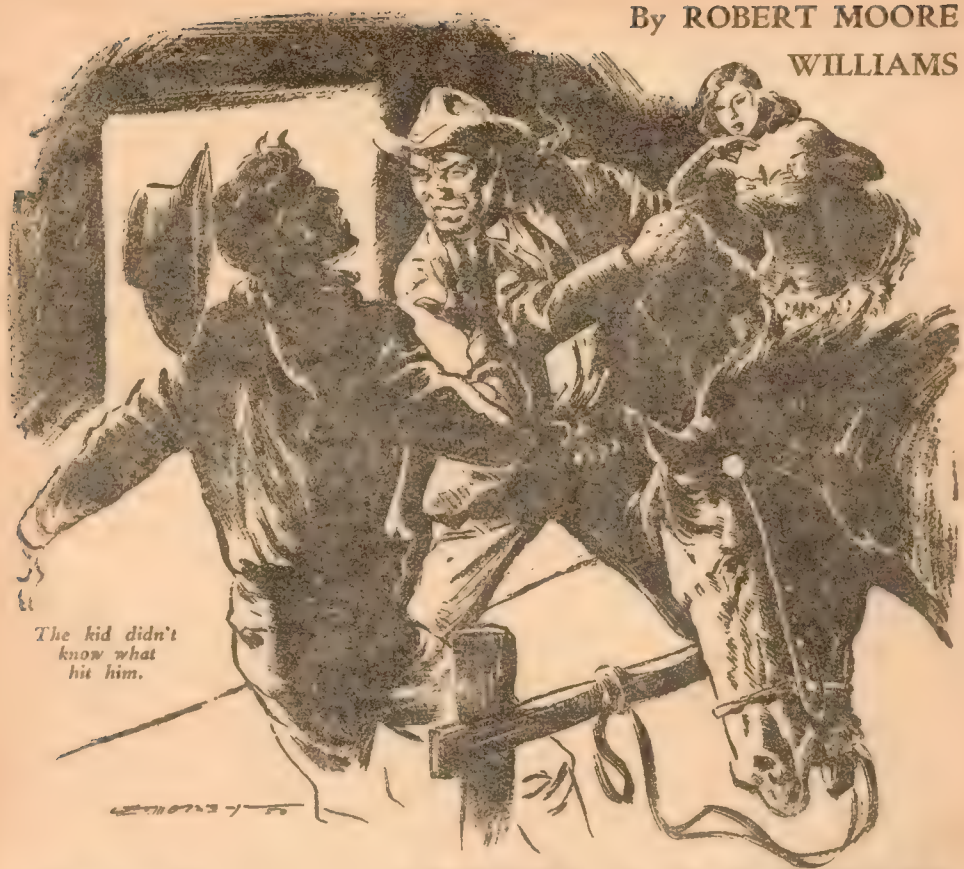

The kid didn't know what hit him.

.44 for a STRANGER

The raw-boned kid from Texas had known that dance-hall girl only for a day, but that was enough to make him a man the rest of his life.

THE girl said, "Mister, it's mighty hard to tell what's in the heart of a man."

Tad Jones shifted his weight from one worn boot to the other. Although he liked being called "mister," he didn't like the way this girl talked and acted, as if she was afraid of something, as if she was scared. He had noticed it yesterday afternoon when he had drifted into this fierce little trail town. He was on his way back to his home west of San Antone after going north with a trail herd, his first trip north.

He had stopped in here, eager for human companionship, for talk and tobacco, after the loneliness of riding

the back trail. He should have headed on south early this morning. He was wanted and needed at home. But there was this girl. So he had lingered this day, pretending that his horse needed the rest, and he had talked to this girl.

Her name was Helen. She was one of the dancing girls here in the Blue Front saloon. This was all he knew about her, except that he liked her, somehow, and that she was scared.

"I guess maybe all men are not like that," he said.

They were standing at the edge of the dancing floor in the back of the saloon. As he spoke, he saw shy friendliness suddenly kindle in her eyes. "I guess maybe you're right, Tad," she said. "I guess maybe some of them are all right. But it's hard to tell which is which and a girl can't take chances." She was standing very close to him, looking up. Her face was wistful and pleasant. For a moment there was no fear in her eyes.

Behind her a shadow moved. A man coughed, heavily, as if he wanted to attract attention. Looking up, Tad Jones saw a heavy-set man standing there. It was Mr. Chet Wallow, the owner of the saloon. Mr. Wallow was looking at the girl Helen, and at him. Turning, the girl saw Wallow.

She gave a little gasp. The pulse throbbed visibly in her throat. A shiver passed through her body, as if she had been touched by an icicle. She drew back from Wallow until she was almost touching the kid. He felt the warmth from her, smelled the perfume in her hair. Her fingers touched his hand. For an instant, the fingers clung to him, as if for protection, then she snatched her hand away.

Wallow looked at them, his face blank, then moved on. Tad felt a shiver pass over the girl.

"Are you afraid of Mr. Wallow?" he asked.

"No, of course not," she answered quickly. "He's very nice. He gave me a job when—" She didn't go on.

"I don't believe you're telling the truth," he said.

Her eyes flashed. "Are you calling me a liar?"

"No," he said hastily. "But if you are in trouble, sometimes a friend can help." Generosity had been bred into him. In his country everybody did what he could to help, as a matter of course, and did not consider it a favor. In trying to help this girl, he was unconsciously keeping the code by which he had been born.

Scorn sounded in her voice. "How would you know a friend when you found one?"

The words cut him. "I'm sorry, Miss Helen," he said. If she didn't want help, there was nothing he could do. He turned away. She caught his arm.

"I DON'T know you," she said. "I never saw you until yesterday. How do I know I can trust you. Anyhow you're just—" Her eyes went up his body. She didn't say the words but he knew what she was thinking. "You don't even have a gun," she finished.

"Paw says I can't have a gun until I'm twenty-one," he answered. Uncomfortable and angry without quite knowing why, he shifted his weight from one foot to the other.

"How old are you?" the girl asked.

"I'm nineteen," he answered. "How old are you?" Nineteen was almost a man. But how old was this girl?

"Look, let's not quarrel—"

"I'm not quarreling," he said. He turned away. Who did she think she was, telling him he was just a kid, hinting that he wasn't old enough to be allowed to carry a gun? He was angry, and hurt without quite knowing why. A drink was what he needed, he thought. True, the prohi-

bition on a gun applied also to whiskey, but— To hell with it! he thought. He moved to the bar.

"Gimme a shot," he said to the bartender. "No water."

Aware that the girl was watching, he tried to toss off the drink with the same careless abandon he had seen other men use. The raw whiskey burned his throat like fire. He choked, gagged, spurted it back out of his mouth.

Around the saloon ran a little gust of sound. It wasn't quite a laugh, it was more of a hint that men were trying not to laugh. Standing beside the bar, a wooden-faced cowboy grinned. Tad Jones had never seen this cowboy before but in this moment, he hated the man. The bartender tried to hide a smile. He hated the bartender. In the mirror behind the bar, he saw his own face, red and angry.

"Something wrong with the whiskey?" the bartender asked, soothingly.

"No. It—uh—just went down the same-way."

"The same way?"

"I mean the wrong way."

"Oh," the bartender said. "Well, if it went down the wrong way, have another one on the house."

If the whiskey had been so much fire, he would have downed it this time. With a thump, he set the empty glass back on the bar. That'll show 'em, he thought.

But it didn't show them. They saw the moisture in his eyes. The wooden-faced cowboy watched him, grinning, and somewhere in the place a man laughed.

"Damn you—" Tad started to say.

The girl had his arm. He hadn't seen her coming and he didn't know quite how it had happened, but she had his arm. "Let's go for a walk, me and you," she said.

"What?" he said. It was in his mind to tell her to go to the devil.

"I want to talk to you," she said. "Please. . . ."

Of course, no gentleman could refuse to talk to a lady when she asked it. He followed her from the saloon and out into the quiet night.

FROM the back end of the saloon, Chet Wallow watched. The tiny red veins in his face seemed to grow larger. In his eyes, the pupils grew smaller.

Then and there he could have stopped the girl from going outside with the kid. His voice raised in a shout would have sent her scurrying back into the saloon. She was afraid of him and she would do what he said. He had hired her—well, because he enjoyed hiring girls like this one, girls who were desperate, who had no other way to turn. In this situation they were more agreeable, he had found. Having hired this one, he didn't intend to have any fiddle-footed kid take her away until he was ready for her to go. Which was not yet.

But Wallow didn't stop her from going outside with the kid. That was not his way. He worked deviously and roundabout, never directly, to get what he wanted. And he wanted this girl. He was very certain about that. He moved through the door and into the long hall from which the small rooms opened. In the third room, he found what he wanted.

Montana was stretched out on a cot, one arm dangling over the edge, asleep and snoring. The instant the door opened Montana was wide awake and one hand was inside his coat, the fingers grasping the butt of the gun holstered there. Looking up, Montana recognized his employer

"Huh?" he said. A vacuous expression settled on his face. His hand came away from the gun butt. He scratched his head. "Huh? You want something, Boss?"

Montana's hair was thick and straight. Above his high cheekbones, his little eyes looked uncomprehendingly out at the world around him. Three things Montana understood very well—guns, knives, and brass knuckles. There was a fourth thing with which he had had experience but which he probably did not understand at all—sudden death.

"You know the kid that blew in here yesterday?" Wallow said.

"Huh?" Thinking was hard for Montana, remembering things was hard. He had to focus his complete attention on one single thing to grasp it at all. He sought around in his mind for an answer to this question. "What kid?" he asked.

"The one that took a shine to Miss Helen."

"Oh, that one," Montana said, remembering. "What about him?"

"I don't believe he likes this town very much," Wallow said.

"Huh? What's wrong with this town?" Montana couldn't understand anybody not liking this town. *He* liked it. It didn't have so many people that you felt pressed in and most of the ones who did live here were on the jump. Also there were no deputy sheriffs here. And no marshal. Any place where there was neither a deputy nor a marshal was a fine town, according to Montana's preferred standards.

Irritation crossed Wallow's face. There was such a thing as being too stupid. "If he don't like this town, he oughtn't to be hanging around here," Wallow explained. "He ought to get on his way. We don't want anybody hanging around here who don't like the place, do we?"

The way he put it, the argument was unanswerable. Montana grasped the situation and understood what was expected of him. "Oh," he said. "Where is he?"

"Outside somewhere with Miss Helen."

"What do you want me to do with him?" Montana asked.

"I don't give a damn what you do to him or with him," Wallow answered. He went out of the room.

Montana took the brass knuckles from his pocket, looked at them. The fleeting reflection of a grin chased itself across his high cheekbones. He rose to his feet.

"I'M SORRY I hinted you were a kid," the girl said. "To me, you're a man. And I wasn't laughing at you back there in the saloon. I guess there has to be a first time for every man to take a drink. Was that your first time, back there"

"It was," he answered. Somehow he felt a lot better, now that he was out of the saloon and in the open air, with the stars and the night above him, and the horses sleeping at the hitching rail. He felt so good he didn't mind admitting that this was his first drink.

"How did you like it?" the girl asked.

"I didn't," he answered. "I guess maybe I ain't growed up yet."

The girl laughed nervously. "I guess maybe I'm not either," she admitted. A cold wind was blowing down from the north. She shivered and tried to draw her thin dress closer about her body.

"Down in San Antone, it's warm," he said.

"Have you ever been in San Antone?" the girl asked. Eagerness crept into her voice as if the thought of being in a place where it was warm appealed to her.

"Sure have," he answered. "I live on a ranch about fifty miles west of there."

"On a ranch?" In her voice the eagerness grew stronger.

"Haven't you ever been on a ranch?" the kid asked, surprised. To him, there was no other way of life.

"No." There was wistfulness in

her voice now as if thinking of a ranch was a lot like thinking of heaven, a place where a girl could have security, maybe comfort, and maybe even peace. "Daddy—we—that is—" Her voice trailed into reluctant silence as if she did not wish to burden others with her troubles.

"Tell me," he urged.

"Well, my daddy was taking me to a ranch— Oh, you don't want to hear about me."

"I'd like to hear, if you don't mind telling," he answered.

"There isn't much to it," she began. And there wasn't. Born in St. Louis, she had been going west with her father, following the tide of migration flowing into the western country. "We reached this place and this was as far as we got. Daddy got sick, typhoid. He—he died here."

"I'm sorry," he said, in quick sympathy. "But why didn't you go on alone?"

"I couldn't. I didn't have enough money."

"Then that's why you took a job in the saloon?" There was a thought somewhere in his mind, some elusive idea he could not quite grasp.

"It was the only job I could get," she answered.

"What—" He hesitated, not knowing whether he dared to ask this question. She might not understand. "What's — uh — what's Wallow to you?"

"My boss. And nothing more."

"Then why did you get so upset when you saw him watching us together?" It would be a hard question to answer, maybe, but it had to be answered.

"Well, the truth is—" The words came slowly at first, then came quickly in little gusts of sound. "The truth is, he says he wants to marry me."

"What?" He was outraged. Wallow was fifty and fat and had no business marrying a young girl.

"But one of the other girls warned me that every new girl who comes to work for him, he says he wants to marry. Then—then—"

"He changes his mind?"

"Sort of."

The kid was silent. He was not sure he dared to speak. Maybe he was too mad to risk opening his mouth. "Would—would you marry him if you knew he wasn't going to change his mind?"

A shudder passed over the girl. "Never!" she answered.

ALONG the boardwalk a shadow moved. The girl gasped and stepped closer to him. He had the impression she was trying to step between him and the shadow. A man stood there on the sidewalk. "Hello? What is it?" the kid said.

What he could see in the dim light from the two lamps on the front of the saloon was a dark face under a black hat, a face that held a fixed grin.

"Montana!" the girl whispered. "You get away from here."

"You go in saloon," Montana answered. "Boss wants to see you."

"What's that?" the kid spoke sharply. "What right have you got to order her around?"

Montana didn't answer. He shoved the girl to one side. His right fist came up in a sharp, jabbing blow.

The kid didn't know what hit him. He sagged against the hitching rail, went down to the ground. The sleepy horses awakened and shied. The girl screamed. Montana kicked the kid in the ribs. The kid tried to sit up.

With the heel of his boot Montana kicked him in the face.

The girl screamed again. "You're killing him!" She flew at Montana, kicked at him, tried to scratch him. He slapped her, hard this time. When she still came at him, he struck her with his bare fist.

Later he carried her through the

back door of the saloon and into one of the small rooms. She was sitting up when Wallow came in.

"What happened?" Wallow asked. Whatever had happened, it was not too important, he thought. Just a matter of beating hell out of a kid and running him off. Nothing to it.

Montana told him what had happened. "The girl tried to stop me and I had to slap her," he ended. His eyes asked Wallow if it had been all right for him to get a little rough with the girl. Wallow's eyes said it had been all right. "What about the kid?" he asked.

Montana grinned. His memory of the kid was a bloody face twisted under the hitching rail while frightened horses shied as they tried to break away. The kid wasn't dead, of course. Maybe he had a broken jaw and a couple of broken ribs, but he wasn't dead. But he wouldn't be likely to remain around town. Montana told Wallow about the kid.

Wallow nodded, pleased.

He cocked his ear as a new sound came from the front of the saloon, catching his attention.

From this small back room, the sound of the main saloon was audible as a hum combined of many small noises, the rattle of the piano, the thump of boots on the floor, the subdued clatter of glassware, rough laughter, occasionally by the shrill voice of a waiter girl. Now these sounds were going into silence.

It was this silence which Wallow had heard and which had attracted his attention. In the silence a voice came, saying, "Will some gentleman please lend me a pistol?"

Listening to that voice, Wallow felt himself turn cold. "Hell on wheels!" he gasped. "That's the kid now."

As he spoke, the little red veins on his face seemed to shrivel up and disappear. "Montana—"

Montana's mouth hung open. Of all the sounds he had ever heard or expected to hear, the last sound on earth he was expecting was the voice of the kid, asking to borrow a gun.

"You didn't do the job good enough," Wallow said.

"I—" Montana's mouth hung open.

"Get him, quick, before he finds a gun."

Montana rose to his feet.

WHEN he came through the front door of the saloon, the kid was still dazed. He had been knocked unconscious and he had taken a terrible beating. His mind was fogged, but fogged or clear, he knew he intended to enter this saloon.

When he stepped inside, and the loungers saw him, silence began to fall. The sight of his bloody face and torn clothes stopped the sound of voices. This saloon had seen its share of dead men, corpses were no novelty in the lives of the hard-bitten crew loafing here. But this was the first time they had ever seen a walking corpse. They gaped and stopped talking and stood still.

"Will someone please lend me a pistol?" the kid repeated. No man moved. Behind the bar, the bartender stopped wiping a glass. A customer, pouring whiskey into a shot glass, forgot what he was doing and kept right on pouring. The whiskey ran over the top of the glass and spilled on the cherry red top of the mahogany bar, eating into the finish there.

The kid's eyes ran around the saloon. "A gun?" he repeated. To him, in this moment, it seemed a reasonable request, a little thing he was asking, a minor favor any man would grant.

But no man granted it. Every man in this place had a gun, except the kid but no one offered to lend him what he wanted. The wooden-faced cowboy who had grinned at him when he choked on the drink was still standing beside the bar, his face

more wooden than ever. There was a gun in the holster at his hip but the cowboy did not offer it. Nor did any man. They seemed incapable of movement, they seemed frozen stiff.

"They must think I'm a ghost," he thought.

From the rear came the sound of quick footsteps. The kid moved. He could guess the meaning of those footsteps. He stepped up to the wooden-faced cowboy. "Can I?" he said. His hand moved toward the gun holstered at the man's hip.

The cowboy didn't move a muscle. Nor did he move when the kid reached down and lifted the gun. Then he spoke, in a strangled voice: "There's an empty under the hammer, kid," he said. "Otherwise, she's ready to go."

"Thank you," the kid said. He knew that most men carried their guns "five beans to the pod," for the sake of safety. It did not matter. Five shots would do what had to be done. If five shots wouldn't do it, the job would never be finished.

He stepped to the middle of the room, aware of the shrinking of men away from him as they got out of the potential line of fire. He hefted the gun, feeling for the weight and the balance. He had shot a gun many times but he had not been permitted to own one. This was a .44, the barrel was blue, the front sight had been filed down, the grips were cedar, to hold firm in sweaty, bloody hands.

The footsteps came through the door.

Montana stood there. Montana reached for the gun holstered inside his coat, then cursed and snatched at his right hand. In his surprise at the appearance of the kid, he had forgotten he was still wearing the brass knuckles. Now, in this desperate moment, he had to snatch them off before he could use his gun.

If Montana had been in the kid's shoes, this mistake would have cost him his life. Montana would have shot in that split second while his enemy was taking off the brass knuckles and reaching for his gun.

But the kid didn't shoot. As if he was determined to prove himself, he waited. Montana got the first shot.

The delay over the knuckles made the gunman hurry. He had lost a lot of vital time, which had to be made up somehow. In trying to make it up, he pulled off too soon. The bullet went to the right of the kid, tearing a path through the air, thudding into the wall on the other side of the room.

Not until then did the kid pull the trigger. In his hand the borrowed gun jumped, shouting its defiance. Montana gulped convulsively. A tremor passed over his body. He took a step backward, trying to bring up the gun in his hand for a second shot. It fell from his fingers, thudded on the floor. His eyes went down to it and a bewildered expression stamped itself on his face as if he was trying to understand how he could possibly have dropped his gun in a moment such as this.

Probably Montana never did know why he had dropped the gun. Probably the devil in hell had to tell him that when he dropped the weapon, he already had a bullet in his heart.

He fell face downward on the floor.

IN THE middle of the room, the kid was vaguely aware of hasty movement around him as men threw themselves flat on the floor or tried to get out of the door. The saloon seemed suddenly vacant, except for one man, the frozen-faced cowboy at the bar.

Acrid smoke stung the kid's nose. In the doorway through which Montana had come he caught a glimpse of movement—Chet Wallow, coming into the main room of the saloon, now that the guns had stopped.

(*Continued on page* 120)

On Cap Tolliver's new Indian reservation, Jesse Ives hoped to find a rest from killing and shooting, until he stumbled on the load of rifles that power-crazy Tolliver was smuggling in to the enraged savages.

THE REBEL OF

An Indian Novelette by

CHAPTER I

Johnny Reb Rides West

JESSE IVES heard the cry of pain as he topped the rise; he reined in, knuckled dust from his eyes. The wagon ruts, baked into the yellow earth, went on ahead until they came to a knot of structures a half-mile away. The cry had carried that far in the clear, sun-gripped air.

"Only Yankees and damfools," Jesse told his horse, "would come, willing, to a place like this." He blew a bead of sweat from his nose. "And I'm no Yankee."

The cry of pain sounded again.

He lifted the reins, heeled the animal and galloped hard for the knot of buildings. He couldn't see much: just some figures bunched together and some dust rising, but he could make out an arm swinging in whip-stroke. That was enough. Jesse Ives didn't like to see a man whipped if he deserved it or not.

He rode straight-legged and a little forward, a cavalry seat. He was tall, a little slouch-shouldered, a little knobby. The wind brushed his cheek. The mare's hoofs sent clods

NAVAJO ROCK

WALT SHELDON

of cracked earth in his wake. His shirt flattened itself to his chest and the brim of his gray field hat—a battered thing, like the Confederacy itself—snapped up in front.

He heard the cry a third time. He saw that a man was tied to a post in a clearing before the big white building—that would be the trading post that gave Navajo Rock its name. Not much else there: just an unfinished 'dobe structure and some log and mud hogans scattered about. The man who was swinging the whip wore blue, like a soldier, and the other men around him were in gaudy things—all Navajos.

"Get on," said Jesse to the mare, and heeled her again.

She was a livery horse and had a rough stride. He'd hired her in Caxton, twenty miles back, from a long-talking, whiskery old redhead there whose name was O'Rourke and who ran the stage and wagon freight depot. O'Rourke, of course, knew all about the new Indian school up at Navajo Rock, and all about how Jesse Ives was to be its first principal—and only teacher. Seemed everybody in these parts knew all about it. Only what they didn't know was how far down the road to hopelessness Jesse Ives felt he'd come. . . .

HE BURST into the clearing then and everyone there—except the man at the whipping post—turned, surprised, to look at him. He racked to a stop a few feet from the man with the whip. It was a mule whip, long and raw. The man was fat, dark-eyed, wore a mustache, and he did sport a uniform. Part of one, anyway. It was a volunteer captain's coat with gaudy shoulder tabs and regimental markings Jesse didn't know. It was too small, and it hung open.

"What the hell do *you* want, bustin' in like this, friend?" the man roared at Jesse. He had budded, infantile lips. His eyes were dull—he stank the air with alcohol.

Jesse looked at him for a moment before he spoke. This would be Cap Tolliver, the trader; back in Caxton they'd made remarks like: *"Well, hope you can get along with Cap."* They hadn't told him much more except that Tolliver had built his trading post for next to nothing just before the Navajos—eight thousand of them—had been marched back from their captivity at Fort Sumner, three hundred miles away. Colonel Kit Carson himself had rounded them up and brought them there back in '63. Now their land had been neatly marked off and made a reservation and there were going to be things like schools and the government was going to make a white man out of the Navajo. Or bust him trying.

Jesse said, "Seems I heard a man yellin' out. Pretty loud. Heard it a half-mile off. Seems to me no man ought to be hurt enough to yell that loud."

Tolliver narrowed one eye. He took a deep breath and it whistled. "You must be the new schoolteacher, hey? And from your talk, a Johnny Reb. Heard you was a Johnny Reb—"

Jesse tried not to let his stiffening show. He'd had to leave his own parts because of men like this, men who wanted to keep on fighting the thing that was over and done with. Back home the place was crawling with them. He'd had to get away to have room for his own restlessness and heartsickness. That was how—after one thing and another—he'd drifted into this appointment to teach at the new school at Navajo Rock. He saw an unfinished 'dobe building just across the clearing—that would be the school; he'd heard Tolliver had taken the contract to build it. A wagon with nails and lumber still unloaded stood there among the stacked, sun-dried bricks and piles of *vigas*. The horses stood in the sun and swished their tails.

In a ring, the Navajos stared at him silently. The man at the whipping post had turned his head, and it was a wild, crooked head with glaring eyes and picketed teeth. His back was slightly humped. Three red whip marks were already across it.

"Mr. Tolliver," said Jesse, easily and politely, "I don't cotton to whipping, no matter what a man's done."

Tolliver's eyebrows went up and he roared, "Well, hear that! The Johnny Reb don't cotton to whipping!" He turned and glanced at a huge-shouldered Navajo with a flat, bland face who stood beside him. "You catch that, Digoon? He don't cotton to whipping!" Digoon's slitted, oriental eyes moved but he didn't answer. Tolliver turned to Jesse again. "Seems to me, friend, a slave-keepin' Johnny Reb shouldn't have much to say about a little whippin'!"

"Let him go," said Jesse quietly. "Untie him from the post." He wasn't quiet inside, he was boiling, and he was thinking that his action didn't make much sense and maybe wasn't very smart, but some things were beyond sense and smartness. Jesse would have done the same if

they'd been whipping a carpetbagger.

Tolliver swayed, then. His eyes stayed dull, gave no warning. His fat arm moved suddenly and the whip came whistling toward Jesse.

ALL in a second this happened: Jesse swung from the other side of his horse, glimpsing movement on the porch of the white trading post but going too fast to see who was there. The whip missed him and cracked across the horse's withers. The horse lurched forward. Jesse got his foot from the stirrup just in time. When the horse had cleared away Tolliver stood there still off-balance from his drunken whip swing—and Jesse sprang at him.

A foot slammed into Jesse's ankle and he tripped and sprawled. He fell knowing it was the big, bland-faced Navajo, Digoon, who had tripped him. He scrambled, trying to fold his legs under him and get up again. Tolliver kicked him in the side, knocking him over. He saw Digoon's bulk coming toward him; he rolled quickly, and Digoon hit the ground. Jesse got to his feet this time. Tolliver started to swing the whip again, but Digoon was rising now, and in the way.

A quick step brought Jesse up to Digoon; Jesse shot his knobbed left fist into Digoon's stomach, Digoon started to double, and Jesse hit his jaw. It was like hitting a block of oak. Digoon shook his head, the way one would at a bothersome fly—Jesse hit his jaw again, and then a third time. Digoon reached out for Jesse with his great wagon tongues of arms, but this time he tripped and stumbled forward. As he went past Jesse slammed him with both fists on the back of the neck. Digoon fell, and his forehead hit the ground with a loud *thunk*. He lay still.

As Jesse looked up again the whip came at him a second time. It caught him about the legs, stinging like fire. He grimaced, unable not to, grabbed the leather still caught about his legs and yanked it away so that it left both his legs and Tolliver's hand.

He stepped toward Tolliver then, and the trader's dark eyes went wide and his infantile lips fell apart. "No! No!" said Tolliver, putting his hands up and desperately trying to back away.

Jesse hit him. On the nose; blood came. "No!" screamed Tolliver. Jesse hit him flush on the jaw and he fell back against the wheel of the wagon. He clutched at the spokes but there was no more strength in his fingers and he fell.

Jesse was panting. His fists were still hooked at his sides. He turned and saw the other Navajos staring at him—in a surly way, it seemed, but it was hard to tell exactly. He pointed to the whipping post and said, "Untie him." They understood at least his gesture. Several moved to comply; it seemed to Jesse he saw one or two grins among them, but he wasn't sure.

And then he heard a woman's voice behind him and it said, "Splendid, mister. Cap Tolliver's had that comin' a long time."

He whirled. A girl stood at the porch railing of the trading post, leaning on her palms. Smiling. She had blue-black hair and very red lips and eyes a bit oversize for her face. She wasn't dressed in a way that fine ladies on their verandahs back in Jesse's neck of the woods would have called respectable. She wore a Spanish blouse that all but slipped off one shoulder and a heavy, barbaric silver and turquoise thing about her neck.

She held her smile and said, "I'm Francia O'Rourke. You probably saw Pap back in Caxton when you pulled in. A little earlier and I could have given you a ride out on the wagon. Pap likes to stay back in the depot jawin' with people that

come in, so he makes me do all the deliveries."

Jesse bowed slightly, wondering if maybe his manners didn't look out of place in these parts, and said, "Pleased to meet you, ma'am. I'm Jesse Ives, the new schoolteacher. I—"

"Yes, I know about you." She widened her smile to a grin suddenly, and then slipped over the porch railing without bothering to go to the steps. She went to where Tolliver lay, bent over him. "Come on. We'll get him inside and patch him up. These boys out here'll take care of Digoon." She looked up then and spoke rapidly to the others in Navajo. They grinned back at her and several moved toward Digoon.

JESSE took Tolliver by the armpits. He was tremendously heavy. Jesse worried him to his feet, and Tolliver groaned and blinked his eyes and managed to make his feet hold him some. Francia got on the other side of him and they steered him toward the porch.

Some of Jesse's hot anger had ebbed away now, and he frowned and said to the girl, "Looks like I kind of upset things around here. I reckon I just better get back on that mare of your daddy's and head right back where I came from."

She looked at him sharply and said, "No. Don't do that, mister. Whatever you do, don't do that—"

"Why not?"

They struggled up the steps with Tolliver. He blinked again, muttered sounds, and tried to wipe at his bloody nose with his fat hand. They heaved; somehow he stumbled up to the porch with them.

She answered Jesse's question then. "They need a man who can get mad and isn't afraid around here. There's things goin' on."

"What?" said Jesse, trying to figure some of it out.

"Tell you later," she said. They were passing through the door now and into the cool inside of the post, where there was a big storeroom filled with counters and piled goods; everything from plows to baking powder. Navajo blankets and concha belts—pawn pieces—hung along the walls. A door in the back led to Tolliver's quarters.

"We'll set him down by the pump and let him patch himself up. Shouldn't be too much trouble for an old soldier like Tolliver always says he is. Then you can come out with me and I'll show you where you're gonna stay and tell you about things around here. I can't spend much time; I want to head back for Caxton before it's too dark."

"Too dark?" said Jesse, trying to frown some understanding into all of it.

"Night time's when folks get robbed around here," she said.

They were in Tolliver's apartment: one large room with a bed and a sink and an inside pump at the sink. A curtain was open at a closet and Jesse saw more uniform coats hanging there. There was a field blue, a tan fatigue and a bright red volunteer's parade tunic and a metal hat with a shako. There was one with big yellow corporal's chevrons tucked away in a corner.

Francia noticed Jesse looking and said dryly, "He's managed to save 'em all."

They dumped Tolliver into a wooden chair. Awareness was blinking back into his eyes now. He licked his lips; he wiped his bloody nose and groaned. He looked up and saw Jesse as if for the first time. He blinked once more. "You had—you had no call to interfere," he said, almost in a whine. "That damn hunchback Natichi let a *viga* he was hystin' slip and knock down a whole day's worth o' 'dobe wall. It's *your* schoolhouse I'm buildin', after all—"

"A man shouldn't be whipped," said Jesse, looking at him.

Francia touched his arm. "Come on, mister. Let him look after himself. I'll get you squared away."

Tolliver got up suddenly and lurched to the sink, and Francia and Jesse walked out of the room.

The hot sun hit them outside and they stepped from the porch and Francia led the way across the clearing to the unfinished schoolhouse. She moved with a strong stride and kept her shoulders level so that there was something of a glide to it. Jesse couldn't keep his eyes from her. He noticed on the side that some of the Navajos had brought Digoon to his feet again, and that somebody had caught his horse and tethered it for him. They looked up and stared at him as he passed, but none spoke, or came near.

Francia said, "Well, mister, nobody likes advice much—but I've got quite a few items if you'll be sensible enough to hear 'em."

Jesse said, "Fire away."

She nodded. "Number one," she said, "is from now on don't *ever* turn your back to Cap Tolliver. Not once."

"I already kind of figured that out," said Jesse, smiling.

CHAPTER II

Shipment of Rifles

THEY were at the schoolhouse, now. The main room still had no roof and one partial wall but crude benches and an iron wood-stove were already set in it. A room at the back would be Jesse's quarters, and this one was finished.

Jesse looked around idly, while Francia O'Rourke talked. She had a low, easy voice and an open, matter-of-fact manner—Jesse thought how that wouldn't have exactly branded her a lady back home, either. He wondered about her; where she'd spent her life and how she'd come to be the grown-up tomboy she was, but he supposed he'd learn that in good time.

"Well, it's not a bad job," she said, looking around at the building, "considering Cap Tolliver built it. No doubt he made money on it somewheres, though. He was a store clerk back in St. Louis before the war, got made a brevet captain along the line, and never quite got over it. He figures to go back when he's made enough money out here so he doesn't have to be a store clerk again. Guess he did the smart thing to come here at that. Country's growing—money coming in. Pap's stage depot'll go over to the railroad when it comes through—they got the roadbed almost here already, though it'll be some time before iron is laid."

Jesse shook the wood-stove to test its sturdiness and said, "You were saying something about their needing a man who could get mad around here—"

"So I was. Well, first off, you've got to remember the Navajos are kind of on probation. It ain't fair, since their land was sacked and ruined when they brought them back, but that's the way it is. Now nobody would've wanted any of this land a few years ago, but since the railroad to the coast is comin' through, there's a lot of people yellin' for it all the way from here to Congress. They're gonna put a strip through the reservation, forty miles wide on either side of the railroad and give the odd-numbered sections to the railroad, makin' it a regular checkerboard. Some o' the best sheep land, too. This ain't bad enough; most o' the whites are wantin' the even-numbered sections for themselves. Well, mister, so long as the Navajos behave nobody'll get that land from 'em. But if they start raidin' and robbin' again—"

"And they've been doing that?"

"They've been stirred up to do it!" she said. She had a way of biting anger into her words. She flicked her jet cascade of hair back from her face. "And I couldn't prove anything in a court of law, but it's pretty clear who's doin' most of the stirring up!"

"Tolliver?"

"No other. He and that India-rubber faced singer, Digoon. A singer with the Navajos is what you'd call a medicine man in other tribes. He knows all the songs and all the ceremonies; he usually ends up rich and has a lot of say with what his particular clan does, anyway."

Jesse frowned at her. "You mean this Digoon, with Tolliver behind him, is stirring up an uprising?"

"Hasn't come to that—yet," she said. "I think Tolliver's been sellin' a few guns. I *know* he's been sellin' whiskey and El Paso wine. The young bucks get the fire in their blood and they ride out and rob who they can on the road. They've raided uncomfortably near to Caxton a couple of times already. Folks've wanted to call the soldiers in from Fort Wingate more'n once, but Pap and a few others've talked 'em out of it. If the soldiers *do* get called in too often, the people yellin' for the Navajo's land'll have a good excuse to take it."

THEY were at the finished wall of the big room, now, at the window. Outside the baked yellow land with its red rocks rolled away to a distant but sharp horizon. Open free land and a huge sky; it made a man feel he could go as far as he pleased in any direction and do what he pleased when he got there. Jesse felt the sudden grip of that idea. He turned and looked at Francia and she was close to him and her large, dark eyes were fastened on his. Her lips were a little parted.

"And why do you side with the Navajos, Francia? What does it mean to you?"

She smiled just a bit, keeping her lips parted. "I guess I'm like you, mister," she said, swaying toward him. "I don't cotton to whipping no matter what a man's done."

He took her then, and she was firm and warm and vibrant, and she came against him and pressed to him and he put his arm around all the vitality of her and held it there. He put his lips to hers. Hers were warm and broad, and they yielded just enough, like the skin of an apricot in its ripest moment. Jesse's head whirled and his blood charged joyously through his veins—

She broke away first. Her eyes looked down, and she frowned. Jesse held her waist, and bent his head to look at her, to find her eyes, and he said, "Darling—"

"That wasn't right, mister," she said. "That wasn't right for me to do."

"But it was."

She shook her head. "It's hard for me to act like a lady because I've been raised—or dragged up—all over the west, in all the far places. Mother died almost before I ever knew her. Pap's been a miner, a stage driver, a trapper, a scout—well, you can see I never had much time to pick up proper manners. I can speak six Indian dialects but I couldn't ask you to pass the beans in French—"

"That doesn't matter, darling; that doesn't mean a hoot," said Jesse, trying to pull her toward him again.

She wouldn't come, but she looked up at him. "But it would matter to you, whether you think so or not right now. I can guess pretty well about you, Jesse Ives. You're not just a ordinary schoolmaster: where'd you teach before? A university, I'd say—"

"A military academy." He shrugged. "What difference does it make? I was a colonel, too, when there was a Confederate Army, if you were about to guess that. But

that's all over, now, don't you see? We're all building a new kind of a country out here in the west, and we're all starting from the same mark—"

There was a cough from the doorway, and they both turned, and Jesse let go of Francia's waist. Cap Tolliver was standing there. He had changed his blue officer's tunic to a buckskin vest. He had a patch of court plaster on his face, just above his mustache and puffy lips. He wore an unpleasant grin. "Just figured I might remind you, Francy, that it'll be gettin' dark soon, if you want to drive along home before it does."

"I was just goin'," said Francia coldly. Jesse saw that her cheeks were red.

Tolliver chuckled and stood aside so they could go through the door....

IN THE days that followed Jesse Ives lost pretty quickly the idea that he had taken on an easy job—a comedown. He started registration while the finishing touches were still being put on the schoolhouse. The word went out to all the hogans and villages of hogans that the children were to be brought in; some came, some didn't. Jesse felt those that came did so out of curiosity, nothing else. Their parents looked at him darkly. Singers stayed on hand to see that he worked no witchcraft.

Most of the children wouldn't give their names—a Navajo's name is very sacred to him and if known can be used by his enemies magically against him. Those who did give names gave fictitious ones. Jesse could never quite tell which set of parents belonged to which set of children. With each parent who came he had to explain, at great length, and through an interpreter, and fully each time, exactly what he would teach the children. They didn't seem to think that any of it was very useful.

Without the hunchback, Natichi, acting voluntarily as interpreter he certainly wouldn't have got any of it done.

He didn't see too much of Cap Tolliver. Not in those first few days, anyway. Tolliver acted as though he had forgotten about the whipping and the fight; he had Jesse to dinner in his quarters the second night and drank quite a bit of whiskey and rambled at great length about his experiences with the Army of the Potomac as aide to this general and that general. He showed Jesse his uniforms, his brevets and his citations.

He spoke of the fight only once—in an indirect way. It was later in the evening when he was a little bleary-eyed from the whiskey. He clapped Jesse on the shoulder, making Jesse feel as though a lizard crawled over him, chuckled and said, "Now, I reckon we can forget our differences, Ives. White men gotta stick together in this here country—or the redskins'll have 'em quick as that." He snapped his fingers, but failed to make noise. "Time'll come, Ives, when we can help each other, and make a little something for all our trouble in bein' here. You mark my words on that."

Jesse didn't ask for details. Fact was, he doubted that Tolliver had details in mind—the whiskey was just making him comradely for the moment. He excused himself early that night and went to bed and read Winfield Scott's *Tactics* until he dropped off.

Near the end of the first week the roof was on the school, and there came the morning when the first class drifted in. A bare dozen showed up. They were all sizes—he had to send two four-year-olds back. The biggest in the class was Atagish, a fifteen-year-old who looked twenty and who said openly that he wanted to learn letters so he could "cheat the

white man back in his own language."

Jesse had hoped to go into Caxton and find Francia that first week-end. But the names and the data needed entering, and a hundred things about the schoolhouse itself needed doing. He didn't get away. He had dinner again with Tolliver Sunday and listened to a long, personal story of the first Richmond campaign.

He noticed that Digoon, the big, bland-faced singer, didn't hang around the post all the time but rode in to call on Tolliver nearly every day and to have long, low-voiced conversations with him. Tolliver was nearly always drunk, and in early mornings, before his eye-openers took effect, looked sick and flabby like a goatskin canteen emptied of water. He kept his head clear in business matters, though. He didn't miss a trick on Jesse's school department accounts and charged Jesse to the hilt for what he bought personally.

Jesse kept Francia's advice and didn't turn his back to Tolliver at any time.

FRIDAY of the second week Jesse left the class to itself during recess and went to the well to draw water for the rest of the day. When he came back the class wasn't in the adobe-walled yard in front of the school. He heard shouting and laughter from the clearing by the trading post. He frowned, raised himself on his toes to look.

The original dozen numbered about twenty, now, but the number varied each day, and new faces kept appearing, as well as old ones reappearing.

He had given up trying to keep accurate records; names and addresses, if any, were always changing or moving about from one person to the other. But he felt he'd made *some* headway. He'd been getting them to laugh or smile occasionally lately and he threw in subjects like mapmaking, showing them their own territory on the blackboard, and using mileages to demonstrate arithmetic. The number of those who came back steadily was growing. He tried to translate everything into their own world; he even went over the railroad strip and the checkerboard land allotment with them, but he wasn't too sure they understood much of it.

He did begin to learn phrases in their difficult language. He learned that there could be as many as fifty different forms for a word like "go" —depending on just where a man went, who was with him, how he went there, and so on. It was beginning to be clear to him why whites and Navajos could sign a treaty and each think he was signing a different thing. . . .

This day Jesse looked over the wall and saw that about ten of the kids were on horseback at the far end of the clearing. They carried war lances. Tolliver was at the porch steps of the trading post and wore his bright red parade tunic and plumed hat, and held a cavalry saber in his hand. He swayed heavily, and his eyes were pressed into half-blind slits. He was trying to wave the saber and roaring orders in a thick voice. *"Seshions of fours, right!"* he bawled at the riders. The boys yipped and whooped and ran their horses in tight circles, some passing Tolliver and laughing at him.

Then Jesse saw the hat—his battered gray field hat—on the same post Natichi had been whipped on. He saw Tolliver stagger over to the line of riders, point at the post and hat with his saber and yell, *"Draw swords—trot—Ho-o-o-o!"*

The first command of the charge. Jesse understood. He could read Tolliver's whiskey-fuddled mind on this one. Tolliver had decided, in his drunken way, to do a little school-

teaching of his own, and show the way he felt about Jesse at the same time. As for the kids—it was a great game to them. They laughed and whooped again, tightened their knees against the horses' bare shoulders, couched their lances and thundered down on that post with the gray hat atop it.

Jesse ran and jumped the wall. He snatched the hat from the post and clapped it on his own head. He stood there and looked into their faces as they galloped down upon him.

A lance came directly at him, its quartz tip white and deadly in the sun. The others had swerved or stopped—this one was either too excited to stop, or too deep in the game to remember that it was a game. It was Atagish, the fifteen-year-old. His mouth was open and a scream of battle came from it. He was hunched on the horse's neck.

"Gallop—H-o-o-o-o!" roared Tolliver's voice from the other side of the clearing.

Jesse didn't move.

The lance plunged toward his chest, and he forced himself not to look at it; he made himself stare at Atagish's wild eyes. The boy's eyes opened a bit. He looked surprised. At the last instant he swung the lance to one side; it grazed Jesse's shoulder, ripping cloth, and then the horse thundered past, and it was all over.

Jesse didn't even bother to look at Tolliver, who was staggering back to the porch now, and who seemed to have lost interest in his own game, already. Quietly, and with neither smile nor frown, he called the kids back into the schoolyard, led them there. He noticed that they all stared at him in a new and thoughtful way . . .

THE next morning Jesse knew he had to have a change of scene. Or maybe that was just the excuse he gave himself to go to Caxton—where Francia would be. At any rate he saddled up—the horse was rented from Tolliver at regular rates—and started off for the hard wagon ruts leading south.

Tolliver hailed him halfway across the clearing. The trader looked gray this morning, and his dark eyes were red-rimmed. He waddled rather than swayed; he wasn't quite drunk yet. "Listen, Ives," he said, "I want to apologize for that business yesterday. Apologize. Only decent thing an officer and gen'l'man can do."

"It's all right," said Jesse, expressionlessly. "Forget it."

"Just wanted to apologize, that's all," said Tolliver, scowling. "Might not be around here long. Just don't want you to have any hard feelings, that's all."

Jesse scarcely heard. He was impatient to be moving on. He told Tolliver again that it was all right, and then spurred away. Just before leaving the clearing he noticed Digoon arriving again on his yellow pony, but he didn't pay much attention to that, either.

He rode out into the hot, spreading land. The sun had been up only a few hours, but sand and rock glistened and threw back its heat already. A red-tailed hawk wheeled over a mesa to the north. A lizard scuttled across the trail, and fat-rumped prairie dogs sat up at the edges of their burrows and stared at Jesse from a safe distance.

A party of young bucks—ten of them—passed him as he topped the first rise; they were all jogging, and didn't bother to wave. They stared at him, but didn't answer his newly learned Navajo: "Hello." He shrugged, rode on, and thought nothing unusual of the meeting.

He crossed the broad, high plain, over arroyos, through draws, in and among scattered red rocks. He saw the green-yellow splash of poplar and cottonwood that marked the little set-

tlement of Caxton after a while. It was still a good seven or eight miles away. And then he saw a wagon in the distance coming toward him. Its driver was just a dark speck, but as he rode on, and the wagon drew nearer, he could make out a mass of blue-black hair, and a slim figure—and his heart began to beat faster.

When he saw without a doubt that it was Francia he spurred the horse and rode hard. He grinned. He gave a long, whooping rebel yell for the sheer joy of it.

It was funny: Jesse had been imagining how he would take her swiftly into his arms and kiss her when he saw her again, but it wasn't that way at all. He pulled up beside the wagon, and she looked up at him brightly, smiled, said, "Hello, there," and he suddenly felt shy, the way he had in his teens when girls confronted him.

He said, "Hello. Where are you headed?"

"Navajo Rock." She tossed her black hair at the boxes in the wagon. "Shipment for Tolliver. Invoice number TH-67500. He's been yellin' for it for weeks. Well, *he'll* be glad when the railroad finally gets here. Understand they've got the roadbed to Singing Mesa, already."

He scarcely heard her chatter. He was looking at her, drinking in the look of her large, dark eyes, her red lips, her tanned forearms, that tumbling black hair. He knew now he hadn't been wrong in the way he felt about her. He grinned and said, "This wagon needs two drivers. I'm going back to Navajo Rock with you." He moved his horse around to the tailgate, tied it, and then took the seat beside her, and took the reins from her.

They laughed and talked and moved on—but it wasn't the same; it wasn't quite the same as when Jesse had held Francia there by the window of the schoolhouse and kissed her. Jesse knew it, and Francia knew it, and each knew the other knew it. And Jesse cussed himself up and down in his own mind for acting like a schoolboy, but even that didn't do any good—

THEY came to where the trail curved around a huge rock formation, wind-eroded into the shape of a dream monster. As they made the turn a group of galloping horsemen suddenly bore down upon them. Jesse recognized the ten young bucks who had passed him earlier on the rise. He saw that some had guns now. They whooped at the tops of their lungs when they saw the wagon; they fired into the air and charged down upon it, then swept past—the horses reared suddenly and plunged forward. The wagon rocked crazily as it left the trail.

"Hang on!" yelled Jesse. He was already braced against the seat and working hard at the reins, trying to turn the horses against each other to a stop.

Francia was hanging on. She turned, glanced at the dust cloud the riders had left, and said, "Tolliver's been feeding them liquor again!"

The wagon creaked, banged and rattled, and the boxes in back bounced sharply in their rope fastenings. The off wheel hit a rock. That side of the wagon sailed in the air for a moment and came down with a loud thump. "Whoa! Whoa, damn you, whoa!" Jesse yelled at the horses.

The near wheel hit a rock. A big one. The whole wagon dipped and swayed.

"Jump for it!" Jesse yelled this time.

They both jumped, and the wagon rolled over, barely missing them. Boxes tumbled about them. The horses plunged on, dragging the vehicle with them, and leaving a long trail of dust behind it.

Jesse scrambled to his feet—

slightly dazed, and not sure whether he was hurt or not—and looked for Francia. He saw her getting to her feet, too, brushing dust from her. "Francia!" he called. "You all right?"

She turned to face him, and nod, and then they were standing looking at each other again, and it was like a signal. She came into his arms and he kissed her—firmly and long.

"I—I tried to keep my senses about me—to wait—to wait until we could both be sure—" Francia said.

He cut her off by kissing her again.

This time when she broke away, she turned her head just slightly, and for not much reason. She stared suddenly at the ground to one side. "Jesse! Look!" She pointed.

He turned and looked, and saw one of the boxes that had tumbled from the wagon. It was split open on the side. He saw the polished stocks and the dull steel barrels of rifles—

Francia said softly, "No wonder Tolliver was so all-fired anxious about that shipment!"

CHAPTER III

War Dance

THEY stood, staring at the weapons, each with his own thoughts for a long moment. Jesse finally said, "Thing to do is take 'em back, I guess."

"No." She shook her head. She kept staring at the box.

"No?"

She moistened her lips. "Tolliver has as much right as anybody else to order a shipment of guns if he wants to. 'Course everybody'd know well enough why he ordered 'em—but they still wouldn't be able to do anything about it. They might watch him closer after that, but sooner or later he'd find his way to arm the Indians."

"The thing to do, then," he said, frowning, thinking along as though on the same axle with her thoughts, "is take the guns on in to Tolliver, and—watch him ourselves."

"That's what I was thinkin'," said Francia.

Jesse said, "I'll take 'em in. I'll say I met you and offered to make the delivery. It might be dangerous. It might turn out to be dangerous, anyway—"

She shook her head. "No. Tolliver might get suspicious that way. Besides—" she looked at him and smiled a little—"I'm not one of your fine parlor ladies. I've been in danger before."

He said, "I don't like it. I don't like it at all."

"You'll like it less," she answered, "if Tolliver gets his uprising—or whatever he's figurin' on—into full swing."

Jesse sighed briefly then, slapped his trousers leg and said, "I guess you're right. You start repacking that box and I'll go after the horses." He took two steps, turned, and added, "But I still don't like it."

It was a good half-hour before the wagon was ready to roll again. It had been Pennsylvania-made, of oak and iron, or the runaways might have damaged it more. They reloaded the crates that had fallen, and lashed them again. They started once more toward Navajo Rock.

Jesse was thoughtful. When he spoke after a while, it was as much to himself as to her. "When I started out after the war I didn't have any real clear ideas in mind, but I knew I wanted to get away. To get away from people—on both sides—who wanted to be rich and powerful at the expense of other people. But I think, now, you don't get away from it no matter where you go. . . ."

"Sorry you came here?" she asked, with a little smile.

He looked at her, smiled back, and said, "Not now, Francia."

She cocked her head suddenly. She listened to something; something distant.

"What is it, Francia?"

She said softly, "Drums—I thought I heard drums—"

JESSE stopped the wagon and listened, too. The road passed along a sloping mound here, and there was outcropping at the crest of the mound, and a rubble of huge boulders along its skirts. It was all the dull red rock of the Navajo country; set against the sky it made that sky look greenish-blue, it made it glare. There was a thick stillness all about—

No—there was sound. Soft, patter-drumming from a distance. Jesse could feel it rather than hear it. And now he thought he sensed the sound of chanting, too. Very faintly. He moved his head about, trying to find the direction of it.

Francia pointed slowly toward a nearly conical mesa in the northeast. "From there, I think. Digoon, the singer, lives there. It may be just a rain sing. But it may be the Enemy Way, too—"

"The Enemy Way?"

"It's their warrior ceremony. Protects 'em from the ghosts of their enemies. That drummin' sounds like it—only I can't be sure."

He switched around in the wagon seat and looked down the trail. "Wonder how long it would take me to ride into Fort Wingate and get the soldiers—"

She shook her head. "We can't do that 'less we're sure. Just stir up more trouble than ever if it's not an Enemy Way. Mister, I'm thinkin' I'd better find out."

"How?"

She nodded at the conical mesa. "Go there."

He frowned and said, "Francia, if there's any scouting like that to be done, you'd better let me do it."

"And how would you know whether they're singin' for a fine crop of corn or scalps?"

"The Navajo doesn't scalp," he said, grinning.

She grinned back. "Well, you know what I mean." She turned and stared at one of the larger clumps of boulders. She pointed. "They won't be expectin' anybody. Chances are they won't have many sentinels posted. This country's my backyard, and I know it that well—and I think I know a place we can see what's goin' on."

He took her quickly by the shoulders, frowned, and said, "Francia, if anything should happen to you—"

"It'll happen to you, too," she answered, smiling dryly.

He saw that she wasn't to be talked out of it. He saw that here was courage, and it would have its way. He stared at her for another moment, then nodded quickly and said, "Let's go."

They hid the wagon as well as they could behind the boulders. Francia took one of the wagon's horses from the traces and mounted it bareback. She pointed the way—a wide circle to the east, which would keep to the cover of ridges and depressions, and come up on the conical mesa from the other and unexpected side.

They rode on. It seemed after a while to Jesse that the ride would never end. It had looked to be only a few miles, but it was now far past noon and the conical mesa was still blue with its distance. They followed a patch of scrub on a slope sometimes touched by rain; they rode the length of a long hollow filled with black lava rock.

Once a covey of gray desert quail whirred up from the chamiso underfoot, startling them. They turned northeast, and then north, and then backtracked west, coming up on the mesa from that side. It had a long,

sweeping slope on this side, like a lady's train.

The singing and the drumming was louder, now. It came in spurts rather than continuously, and Francia listened carefully all the while trying to recognize any part of its pattern. Jesse kept silent, so that she could listen.

They left the horses a good mile from the mesa's long skirt, picketing them below the banks of an arroyo. They moved forward afoot—slowly, cautiously—through parched land, and the tough, twisted growths that clung to it. They mounted the skirt of the mesa.

ABRUPTLY they were on the crest; they could see over it and on the other side. They stopped, and kept well behind a clump of juniper that was before them. Now the drumming and singing was sharp in their ears. And there were Navajos down there in a wide clearing at the foot of the mesa—without counting, Jesse estimated several hundred.

Most were seated in a wide semicircle, many women among them. A line of warriors, stripped to the waist, and carrying weapons—lances and bows and arrows and shields—stood nearly in one spot and shuffled gently to the rhythm of the song.

Digoon, the singer, was in the center. He wore only a breech cloth, and his huge body, beefy rather than fat, seemed inflated. His voice carried far and clear; he broke often into piercing falsetto notes. He had a kind of stick, a foot or so long, on the end of a buckskin thong, and he whirled this about his head so that it gave a roaring sound as it fluttered through the air.

Francia stared, and without moving her eyes said quietly to Jesse, "It's the Enemy Way, all right. That's the bullroarer he's swingin', there. The wood it's made of comes from a lightning-struck tree. It's sacred. Look at the warriors—they're carryin' only lances and bows. But they've got guns comin', though they wouldn't use 'em in the ceremony, because they don't use any foreign objects—"

Jesse whispered, "You can tell me all the fascinating details some other time, Francia. Right now we'd better hop the hurrybone stage, I'm thinking—"

They slipped away quickly, and then retraced their steps across the open space and back to the horses. They mounted and moved back along the same wide circle. Jesse noticed that Francia kept moving her head and darting her eyes in one direction after another, like a high-strung horse looking for something to shy at.

"What is it, Francia?" he asked her.

She frowned and said, "Nothin' I can see. I—I just have a feelin' we're bein' watched—"

They kept riding. They passed the meadow of chamiso, crossed the lava rock again, and then moved along the scrub-covered slope. They went at a steady jog, not to tire the horses, or at least to keep Jesse's mount fresh so that he could make the dash in to Caxton, get a new horse, and ride on to Fort Wingate from there.

IT WAS near mid-afternoon when the wagon trail came into sight again. They saw the turret-like outcropping that marked the spot where they had left the wagon and the other horse. "Come on," said Francia, and they galloped the last few hundred yards. The clump of boulders appeared. They swerved toward it, and it was about in that moment that Jesse caught the flicker of movement near it.

"Hold it!" he yelled to Francia. He reined in. She started to do the same, and then from behind the boulders a group of horsemen—Navajos

—suddenly appeared and thundered toward them.

"The other way!" Jesse said. He wheeled his horse toward the outcropping.

Six horsemen came around the turn of the road and moved toward them from that direction.

Jesse and Francia stepped their horses about in several bewildered directions for a moment—

"I'll try to draw them off!" Jesse said. "You see if you can slip through and ride like the very devil for Caxton!"

"All right." She nodded hastily.

It was like this: they were in an open, sandy plain and one group of Navajos moved toward them from the south, where the boulders and the wagon lay, and the other came from the north where the road made a sharp turn around the rocky hill. The road lay to the west, a good two hundred yards away. The bunch in the south could cut them off easily if they should head for the road together. But Jesse meant for both of them to head east, drawing each group after them, and then for Francia to switch back suddenly and race for the road while he kept riding. She had understood this from his gestures, and from the turning of his horse. But he had little time to admire her keenness in the matter, now. He slammed his buttocks to the cantle, raised the reins, kicked the horse, rode and rode hard.

The two lines of attackers swerved. He noticed for the first time that they carried guns, not lances, and he wondered fleetingly why they didn't shoot. Francia, riding bareback, moved at his side for a few moments, until the larger horse outdistanced hers. Just before she fell back, Jesse turned and yelled: "Now! Ride for it!"

She racked the horse around. It reared slightly, snorted, then plunged off in the new direction. Jesse didn't look any more. He leaned forward and slapped behind him with the rein-trail to urge the last drop of speed out of the mount.

It was all up to luck now, and there was nothing more he could do but ride and hope. He heard the soft thunder of his horse's stride on the sandy earth. He felt its muscled torso leap and draw under him. Foam broke from its mouth and whirled past him in the wind—

A sixth sense made him turn and look to the right. A shape was looming over him—a slim, hawk-nosed Navajo on a huge, lightning-footed black horse. A rifle was raised as a club and already swinging toward him.

He cried out, without meaning to, and raised his arm to ward off the blow. The rifle struck. Its hard stock slammed his arm aside and then cracked his head.

There was a momentary blur, and after that, darkness.

CHAPTER IV

A Ghost Rides

HE HEARD the drums and the singing before the darkness lifted. It had been like this once in the field when, in a charge, his horse had fallen, stunning him, and he remembered that then the sounds of battle had come back before his sight had; the smell of burnt powder, sweat and death had been last to return.

So he heard the drums and singing now and after a while he was conscious enough to know that this was the chant of the Enemy Way—the one he had witnessed from the skirt of the mesa. He opened his eyes and saw that he was near all of it; he was supine just beyond the semicircle of seated watchers; his head was on a saddle. He turned his head and saw that two Navajos kneeled

by his side. They watched him. Their eyes moved only slightly as they saw that he was awake.

Other things came to his knowing; quick and little things. A wet cloth was about his head. His head throbbed; he touched the side of it and the scalp was tender. His stomach was sick, too, and he felt like retching but was determined not to. Not in front of all of them, he wouldn't.

It was evening, now, almost dark, he noticed that, too. Fires had been started beyond the semi-circle and unsteady red light was dancing over flat, heavy-jawed faces and naked torsos. One line of shuffling warriors was moving off—for a rest, perhaps—and another line was taking its place. Digoon was not about, and two singers he didn't recognize were continuing the ceremony.

Then he heard a familiar, heavy voice behind him. "The Johnny Reb's awake, now, is he?"

His two guards turned and looked around in a bored way; Jesse struggled from the saddle pillow and turned, too. Cap Tolliver stood there, with Digoon—quiet and slit-eyed—beside him. There was the usual stink of alcohol, but Tolliver wasn't swaying now; he was comparatively sober.

Jesse said, "Hello, Tolliver." He wanted to say that to show that his voice was steady—in a way he wanted to find out himself if it really would be.

Tolliver smiled; it made his lips look flabbier than ever. "You owe me some thanks, Ives, and you don't even know it."

"How do you figure that?"

"Digoon here was all for killin' you right off. Only I give him different ideas."

Consciousness had come back fully now, and with it terrible pain in Jesse's skull. He forced himself to ignore it—at least while he faced Tolliver. His face felt drawn, and he knew it must be pale. His lips were dry, and he moistened them with his tongue before he spoke again. "Where's Francia, Tolliver? What did you do with her?"

"She's in good hands." Tolliver kept grinning.

"Whose hands? Where? Where is she, damn you, Tolliver?" The surge of anger made his skull ache more.

Tolliver laughed. "You Johnny Rebs always did have a temper, didn't you? Temper don't get you nowheres, Ives. Take m'self. I got call to feel pretty mad with you now, that's the truth. But that don't get a body nowheres." He put a fat finger to his forehead. "Usin' the head does. Fact is, Schoolteacher Ives, you fit into all the plans just first rate."

"How?"

Tolliver put his thumbs into his belt. "The railroad workers got the roadbed pretty deep into Navajo land. Not far from here. They're gettin' their first payroll tomorrow—not scrip, Federal paper money. You're a man as ought to see some o' that money rightfully belongs to our Navajo brothers."

"Go on," said Jesse. "Keep talking."

"Well, now, they're surer'n hell's gate gonna blame somebody for hearin' about the payroll, armin' the Navajos, and leadin' 'em there. They're goin' to find you, Mr. Ives, on the field of battle, as you might call it. Shot by tragic accident in the whole mix-up. Makes things come out nice and even, like a smart-kept set o' books, don't it, Ives?"

Jesse didn't say anything. Tolliver laughed, nudged Digoon, and moved on, circling to behind the drums.

LATER, when it was even darker, Digoon took up the chant again. Jesse could see now that it was done in shifts, and kept up all day and night that way. The ceremony was

complicated, but most seemed to know just what to do next; he remembered some of the things Francia had told him about it as they rode back. The Navajo believed strongly in ghosts, and without the right medicine beforehand, the ghosts of a man's enemies came back to haunt him. As the darkness thickened he could see more and more that the ceremony was supposed to purge spirits from the air and from the night surrounding them.

In spite of himself his eyelids became heavy many hours later. He drifted off to sleep with the chant, and the sound of the roaring sticks, and the shuffle of feet in his ears.

A whisper woke him. He opened his eyes; it was still dark and the fires were flickering low and the dancing and singing was still going on, but more softly now. His guards were still on either side of him, watching him impassively, but the whisper had come from behind.

He raised his head, looked around. He saw a twisted face and a picket-toothed grin, and it took him some moments to blink at the gloom and realize that this was the hunchback Natichi he'd first seen lashed to a whipping post. Startled, he glanced at the guards—but they seemed to know all about Natichi, and paid no attention.

Natichi struggled with English. He pointed to the two guards, one by one, and said, "Have same name. Same family. You no die. Shoot—no shoot straight. You look like die, no die."

Jesse frowned. "You mean tomorrow they'll be told to shoot me, but miss? And I'll pretend to fall—then run off when I can?" He whispered and he gestured as broadly as possible as he spoke.

Natichi grinned again, nodded, and then faded off suddenly into the darkness again.

Jesse lay back once more. It was near dawn; the steel grayness was in the east. He stared into the sky and tried to put the way he felt into orderly packages of thought. His life—if all went well—would be spared, but somehow he still felt raw and bitter inside. The taste of failure. He'd been defeated in war and that defeat seemed to hang on—there'd been nothing for him to do back home—there'd been only drifting on his way here—and now that he'd found a direction in the Navajo Rock school, and in Francia O'Rourke, that was being taken away, too—

A second time, in spite of himself, he drifted off to sleep.

IT WAS fully light when they woke him. The sun was just balanced over a ridge in the east. The camp was stirring. The fires were being banked and Navajos were knotting bright cloth bridles about the lower jaws of their horses. He caught an occasional glimpse of Tolliver and Digoon, both moving about and directing things.

Jesse's wrists were bound with rawhide and he was put on a horse, and then without any of the fuss or ceremony of the night before the band moved off toward the southeast. Rifle barrels glinted in the morning sunlight.

Jesse's two guards rode on either side of him—he hadn't heard a word out of them yet. One was tall and slender and had a jaw that jutted out so far his sharp nose seemed ready to plunge into it and pierce it. The other was stocky with a broad mouth that reminded Jesse of a garfish. Neither so much as looked at Jesse, unless it was from the corner of his eye.

The group of horsemen rode silently and steadily over the open but rolling country, picking its way through draws, around mesas, and past huge outcroppings of red rock. They came presently to a mesa sev-

eral miles long, one with sloping sides which the horses climbed easily.

At the top, they paused, and several scouts went forward and peered over the opposite rim of the mesa, and Jesse knew that the road-building camp was in the valley beyond.

Tolliver, riding a heavy seat on a square-boned black horse, was making a great to-do about tactics. He used broad gestures. He split the group and sent half circling to the left, half to the right. Jesse was brought along with the right hand group, led by Digoon; Tolliver had already taken command of the other party.

They came to a clump of rock and juniper and from here they could see into the valley. The roadbed was white against the tan-green of the land; it stopped abruptly near the middle of the valley and about a score of tents had been pitched there. A few wagons stood about, and there was one Dearborn wagon by the largest tent which Jesse supposed must be the pay wagon. Distant, and in the clear air the men about the place looked like tiny dolls. A line was formed at a big table in front of the main tent.

As Jesse watched there came suddenly the sound of a shot from the other end of the mesa, and Tolliver's group broke from cover and began to charge, yelling and firing down the slope. In a moment Digoon's group would charge, too, attacking the camp's other flank and arriving there about the same time Tolliver did.

The big, bland-faced singer turned in the saddle and gestured at Jesse. Jesse's two guards nodded. The one with the jutting jaw and the sharp nose backed his horse a few steps, lifted his rifle, and pointed it at Jesse.

Jesse, in all the gravity of the moment, had a wild and crazy thought. *I hope he doesn't miss missing,* thought Jesse. . . .

THE RIFLE sounded and Jesse felt the sting of powder on his forehead and cheek and knew then that a bullet couldn't have struck him. He made himself topple from the horse; he didn't try to topple easily; but fell like a sack. His head and shoulder struck the ground and for a moment he thought he had broken his neck. The pain was sharp and terrible and reached all along his arm and side.

Digoon yelled and gestured again, and pointed to him once more, and the two guards wheeled their horses toward him. Then Digoon crouched over his horse's neck and led the rest away, downslope.

The two guards dismounted. It was clear they'd been told to loosen Jesse's bonds and then throw him over his horse and bring him nearer the scene of the attack where he could be dumped and found later—and blamed. The Navajo with the garfish mouth bent over Jesse and quickly slipped the rawhide from his wrists. Jesse got up, swaying a little, and rubbed his wrists.

The taller Navajo pointed to the southwest, in the direction of Caxton. "*Gha-ah!*"

The sound of shooting came now from the valley beyond the edge of the mesa; a sharp, continuous rattling. Shouting peppered into it every few moments. Someone screamed out with pain.

Jesse had already decided what he must do—he'd had all the night for his decision. He was through drifting; he was going to see the job through this time, even if it meant that he lost.

Keeping his eyes expressionless he sized up the distance between himself and the mounted Navajo, the angle of the man's gun, and the position of the big-mouthed guard beyond him. There was no personal sympathy in their act, he knew that: they had merely discharged an obligation to Natichi. Once they had set him free

they were free to kill him again, if he should warrant it. He had an idea they might even prefer it that way since they'd have to work hard to make their excuses when it was found that Jesse had escaped. . . .

He stopped speculating and leaped suddenly at the big-jawed Navajo. He had the advantage of surprise, at least. He saw the Indian's eyes widen in the instant before he struck. He jumped upward, grabbed the loosely held rifle, and the Indian unwittingly helped him by dodging, drawing away. The rifle came free; Jesse held on to it. He fell back again, stumbled, went to his knees and quickly righted himself. He saw a blur of movement beyond the long-jawed Navajo, and then heard the sound of a shot—

It all happened so quickly that only in the moment after it had happened could Jesse tell clearly what had happened. The stockier guard, aiming for Jesse, had shot the tall one. The latter was holding his side now and yelling with pain. Now the other circled and raised his gun a second time. It roared, showed a sheet of flame and black smoke.

Jesse felt a hard slap and sting where his shoulder sloped into his neck, but he had already raised his own rifle. There was a blur of the sight, and there was a blur of the target beyond it, and that was his aim.

He squeezed the trigger, and without waiting to see the result yanked the repeater lever behind it and squeezed again. The Navajo opened his wide mouth, stared, and then fell backward over the cantle.

Jesse caught the man's pony. It reared a little, objecting to its new rider until it felt his firm knees and hands. Then Jesse spun it about, and rode it hard over the rim of the mesa, down the long slope.

Far down there the Navajos were riding back and forth, firing into the camp, and the defenders had found cover and were firing back. Jesse was not thinking now. He was riding with only one thing in mind—to get down there and kill as many as possible before they killed him. He would be seen doing that, and they would know, when they looked at his dead body, that he'd had nothing to do with the attack. But more than that he would have finished something; he would have kept from drifting away once more and starting over again, hopelessly, in a new place.

HE CAME upon two Navajo riders on the perimeter of the attack. He yelled a rebel yell, rose in the stirrups and raised the rifle. They turned—gaped at him. Their faces went wide. One of them sat transfixed, and the other screamed suddenly, and spurred his horse in the opposite direction.

It puzzled Jesse at first. He kept riding. Others turned, saw him, and sudden fear gripped their faces, too.

He heard the word, *"Bahadzid!"* shouted several times.

He kept riding, and whenever he came in sight, and was recognized, Navajos would spread and scatter. Some were already leaving the scene of the attack and pounding toward the mesa again. He heard a roaring voice suddenly, looked to the left and saw Cap Tolliver riding toward him and shouting to the Indians: "He's alive! He's no ghost, damn you! Damn you all! Kill him!"

Some hesitated in their flight, and started to move toward him again. The shooting increased suddenly; through all the quick blur Jesse saw that some of the white men in the camp had left their cover and begun a counterattack. He swung his horse to the left and headed for Tolliver.

The trader had a Colt revolver pointed at him. It looked bigger than it ought to be; even in the confusion of the moment Jesse could see clearly

the huge black hole in the end of it. Jesse fired his rifle from the hip and with one hand. It was a clumsy shot; he didn't hope to hit Tolliver with it, and he didn't. But the blast spoiled Tolliver's aim; the revolver spoke and the slug went wild.

In the next second Jesse's pony crashed into Tolliver's square-boned black. Jesse threw himself forward, dropped his own weapon and grabbed Tolliver. Both men fell to the ground.

They rolled, and Jesse felt Tolliver's weight atop him. He looked into the man's dark, deep-set eyes and he felt his fetid, whiskey breath. He jerked, and tried to throw Tolliver off—too much weight, the man stayed. He saw now that he had his right wrist, and that the Colt was still in it, and Tolliver was trying to bend the muzzle toward him.

Jesse hooked his leg inside Tolliver's and swung the man over, and off him. He broke his own grip on the gun wrist by doing this. Tolliver rolled away. Jesse saw him rising to one knee, and he gathered his own feet under him. He plunged forward and the revolver sounded again.

Jesse felt fiery pain along his scalp. He was dazed. But he was still conscious enough to know that he had struck Tolliver again, and that once more they were on the ground, and that again he had grabbed Tolliver's fat wrist, and bending it. The gun went off a third time. It was some moments after that before Jesse realized that Tolliver was limp, and that a bloodstain was spreading over the front of his shirt. . . .

JESSE IVES scarcely heard all of the congratulations, scarcely listened to the explanation of how his appearance had opened the way for the counterattack that drove the Navajos off; he scarcely remembered how they dressed his wounded neck and scalp. He finally managed to make them understand that there was a girl, and that he had to find her. That was all right; they rode off toward Caxton with him.

They found Francia finally, not along the road, and not in Caxton, but bound and gagged in a storeroom at the trading post in Navajo Rock. She was shaken—delirious—it was a week before Jesse could talk to her again.

He stayed in Caxton, waiting for her to recover, and seeing occasionally in the town some of the same Navajos who had taken part in the attack. He didn't point them out—he had an idea that for a while at least they had come to their senses and that with Tolliver gone, and Digoon, himself, killed in the skirmish, they would stay that way.

There came the day finally when Francia's fever was gone and she looked at Jesse with clear eyes. She was propped in bed, and he sat beside the bed and they looked at each other for long minutes without saying anything.

Francia finally broke the silence. "Must be," she said, finally, "the cat's got both our tongues."

Jesse nodded and smiled. "But it doesn't make much difference," he answered. "From now on we've got all our lives—together—to do our talking. And all of this big, new country we're going to help build to do it in. I'm through drifting, Francia, and—"

"And wasting time talking," she said, grinning.

He raised his eyebrows for a moment, then he grinned, too. He said, "So I am." He took her hands and leaned toward her then, and saved the talking for another time. . . .

RETURN OF

Sam Wingate hadn't realized how hated his family was in the town of Tuscabelle until he found himself with nothing between him and the gallows save a stranger's whim.

By DEAN OWEN

EACH MAN, Sam Wingate had read somewhere, is entitled to one mistake. That made a lot of sense to Sam, who had spent most of his twenty-five years living down the reputation of his family. However, Sam's mistake was unfortunately permanent in the person of Smiley Haddon who now lay in eternal repose beyond the town limits in what the citizens liked to call Evergreen Cemetery, the only thing green about it being the lumber they used for the coffins.

It didn't make much sense to Sam Wingate that he should be in Tuscabelle's one-cell jail, because it was common knowledge that Smiley Haddon had been arrested a total of thirteen times for crimes varying from branding other people's cows, to being drunk, and suspicion of murder. And from the people Sam had talked to he learned that it had been the general feeling in Tuscabelle and the surrounding range that Smiley Haddon would one day meet the wrong man. He had. He had met Sam Wingate. But now that Haddon was dead, Sam Wingate had learned bitterly, the sudden and spectacular manner of his passing had turned him into a hero.

Outside his cell window on Tuscabelle's hot and dusty main street the arguments went on. A bearded teamster summed it up by saying, "Sure Smiley Haddon had a lot of faults. But if one of them damn Wingates think they can come in here and gun down one of us, they got another think comin'!"

The men turned and glared at Sam through the window bars, seeing his face edged with gray and the shock of brown hair that looped over his forehead.

The town spoke of the Wingates as if they still were a large and powerful family, forgetting that since the passing of Rolf Wingate, they had disintegrated, their lands all but gone along with their prestige. In the old days, Sam was learning, the Wingates had pressed their heels on a lot of necks. Memories in Tuscabelle were long.

Through the bars Sam watched portly Sheriff Charlie Nagle slapping his constituents on their dusty backs with a fat hand or passing out cigars.

A little awed by all this attention, Sam Wingate was still too stunned and embittered to give a logical answer as to how or why he had found himself in this mess. Raised by an aunt in San Bernardino, over in California, Sam Wingate had struck out for Tuscabelle when that old lady had died, to look over the few Wingate acres she had left him in her will.

He had ridden into town on Saturday mounted on a *grulla*, a tall, dusty rider in flat-crowned hat,

THE GUN CLAN

He struggled to get to his feet, for this was his last chance.

denims and new boots. It thrilled him to be in the town founded by his grandfather Rolf. But when he signed *Sam Wingate* to the register at the Mansion House he was aware that he was regarded in a new light.

AT FIRST when he walked down Center Street with his spurs dragging he was a little proud that a Wingate could still command this sort of attention. But there was no friendliness in the glances thrown his way.

At the slack supper hour, that first day, two men had caught him in the thick twilight and put their gun barrels and their boots to him. He had battled them off, being young and strong and tough. There behind the livery stable it had been a silent and bloody skirmish. Lon Deshard came out of it with a broken nose and a gash over his right eye that still had not healed. Smiley Haddon, the other assailant, had managed to make his escape on horseback.

By the time Sam Wingate walked into the hotel dining room for supper that night he knew the whole town had heard about the fracas. But in-

stead of buying Sam a drink for beating the pair at their own game, the town became even more unfriendly.

"The hell with this place," Sam Wingate had said.

On Monday morning he rode his *grulla* out to look over the forty acres his Aunt Sarah had paid taxes on all these years. From a rise among the sandstone buttes, he had surveyed his land with his brown eyes. He rode down to the shack set squarely in the center of the land, seeing the tinned goods on the shelves and the stack of dirty dishes in the sink. But here you packed in your own water, or you went dry. Forty acres of nothing, that was the Wingate heritage. Whoever had holed up in this barren place, Sam decided, was welcome to it.

That night when he rode back to town he was arrested. Somebody had found Smiley Haddon lying face down in the sand a mile out of Tuscabelle, his head split open like a melon. It was the twenty stab wounds in his back that caused a new value to be placed on the life of Haddon.

A trial? Yes, there was a trial. Had it not been for giving Tuscabelle citizens and surrounding ranchers and miners a chance to come in for a holiday, they could have found him guilty in one day instead of taking a week. Only one face in that crowded courtroom showed him any sympathy; the girl with the gently sunburned face and the compassionate eyes. Every day he saw her watching his face as if trying to decide in her own mind his guilt or innocence.

Once during the last day of the trial she had brushed past the chair where he sat with his hands manacled. He saw the clean sweep of her throat and the high bosom beneath the gray and green checks of her gingham dress. She put a strong smooth hand on his shoulder, saying, "Don't give up hope."

The ache and the bitterness spread through him when he saw her go up the crowded aisle with her shoulders straight, the cloth of her dress falling gracefully over swaying hips.

THIS MORNING Sheriff Charlie Nagle, smelling of fresh beer and eggs, crowded into the small cell, a fat and garrulous man.

"Mornin', Wingate," he said. "Reckon we're ready for our little trip. Goin' to be hot as hell too."

Sam Wingate hobbled out of the cell. You can't walk very well with a chain padlocked around your ankles and the other end of the chain fastened to the manacles that hold your hands behind your back. Outside, he met the angry stares of Tuscabelle citizens and he felt a cold ripple along his back at the low angry sounds from their throats.

"Now, boys," Sheriff Nagle boomed in his best electioneering voice, "we got to have respect for law. You folks seen fit to elect me, and"—he lifted his plump hands—"I hope to serve you for many more terms. There's no need of us blackening the fair name of Tuscabelle by doing something we'll all regret later on."

With a flourish he led Sam Wingate to the freight wagon that had been specially rigged for the occasion with its sideboards up and a tarp stretched across the top. A huge ring had been fashioned by the town blacksmith and bolted to the floor. Also carefully bolted to the floor was a bench.

Sam Wingate was lifted bodily into the wagon and shoved down on the bench. A chain was run through the ring on the floor, looped around the manacles behind his back and locked there. All the way to Yuma, except for food and rest stops, he'd be chained to this bench. Again, as he had a thousand times, he wondered why he had ever left the comparative tranquillity of a town like San Bernardino to ride back to the land of his

fathers only to get his head in a noose.

"You let Sam Wingate get away," a voice yelled from the back of the crowd, "and you'll never get another vote in Tuscabelle!"

Sheriff Charlie Nagle made blustering sounds with his lips and tried to locate the man who had spoken.

Sam Wingate, staring into the blinding heat, saw the man. He'd never forget that face. It belonged to Lon Deshard who still bore the permanent marks of his encounter with Sam Wingate behind Jensen's Stable. A broken nose pushed to one side and a jagged scar on his forehead.

A tall, rangy man in a cotton shirt faded and worn, wearing stained levis, with a heavy gun at his belt. There was something in his eyes, a dirty green, that sent a surge of anger through Sam Wingate.

That man, Sam wanted to shout, *he was living in the shack on my forty acres along with Smiley Haddon. Ask him about Haddon's split head and the twenty wounds in his back!*

Sam's defense attorney, a lank man named Pettigrew, had half-heartedly tried to bring out these facts. But it was agreed by the twelve peers sitting in judgment that it was just like a Wingate to beat a man over the head when his back was turned and then use a knife on him.

Sheriff Charlie Nagle lifted his fat hands to get the crowd's attention while Paul Ringold, the local deputy, climbed into the wagon seat and picked up the reins.

"It's only right that you folks should see the hangin'," Charlie Nagle boomed, "because the crime was committed here." The tickets for the execution were to be left in Burman's Saloon to be given out by lottery. "But I think," Nagle went on, "that seein' as how Lon Deshard was Smiley Haddon's partner he ought to get a pass without havin' to draw for it."

Lon Deshard's scarred face turned crimson as he declined the pass. Sam Wingate heard one of the townsmen tell the sheriff that Deshard had once spent three years at Yuma Prison and he wouldn't set foot inside the walls again even to see the murderer of his partner drop through the gallows trap.

The sheriff grinned embarrassedly, climbed up on the wagon seat, and lifted his hand in farewell to the crowd. Two men came running up from Burman's Saloon bringing three cases of beer wrapped in wet burlap, cheese sandwiches and a bottle of whiskey. The sheriff gratefully and thirstily accepted the gifts.

The wagon began to roll.

THE HEAT under the tarp, caught and held by the high wooden sideboards, drew the moisture and the life from Sam Wingate. Why couldn't they at least have put him in a stage coach or roped him to a horse? But Sheriff Charlie Nagle's sense of showmanship had prevailed. It had, among other things, helped him stay in office for two terms.

Sam Wingate was awakened from his lethargy by the barking of a dog and he saw through the open end of the wagon that they had turned off the main road. A little further on he saw corrals and a barn. He heard a door open and slam and then the sound of somebody walking across the yard.

Sheriff Charlie Nagle said, "'Afternoon, Ma'am." He introduced himself, and added, "We're escorting a criminal to Yuma and I figured maybe me and my deputy could take supper with you." He laughed. "At county expense, of course."

The woman said, "You're more than welcome, Sheriff."

A man's voice, an older voice, said, "What's the trouble, Anne?"

She explained quickly. "Supper's almost ready, Dad."

"Step in, Sheriff, and bring your prisoner," the man said.

"Always glad to meet my constituents," Sheriff Nagle said. "The prisoner eats in the wagon." His voice lowered as if to impart some news of great import. "It's the notorious Sam Wingate that I got in the wagon."

The man said, "Funny, but I thought all the Wingates was dead."

"They soon will be," the sheriff chuckled dryly.

"Never knew anything particular bad about the Wingates," the man went on. "They got their start same as everybody else around here, by drivin' a herd up from Texas and pickin' up a few strays here and there. Only crime I ever heard proved against the Wingates was that they had too much money. And they finally even lost that when old Rolf died."

"Sam Wingate killed a fella named Smiley Haddon."

The man introduced himself as Bert Cutler.

The sheriff said to his deputy, "Paul, you take care of the team."

When the deputy hastened to obey, the girl said, "Drive the wagon in the shade of the barn. It must be stifling for him in that wagon."

"Don't reckon you got to worry much about Wingate's health," the sheriff said, laughing. "We're hangin' him Friday."

The sounds, then, of them all moving off toward the house.

DESPERATION born of futility laid its cold hand on Sam Wingate. To be free of these chains, to be able to again sit a saddle and feel the wind in his face. To live out his destiny and not have to walk onto a scaffold and have the life jerked from him by a piece of yellow rope. Suddenly he hated them all, the blind stupid fools who had pronounced him guilty, who turned deaf ears on his plea of innocence. And all because he was a Wingate.

It must have been the heat that was cracking the reserve he had built around himself since this awful thing had started, for he knew he was talking aloud, he could hear his voice but could not make much sense out of what he was saying. He wondered if he might be losing his mind. He imagined that a girl with braided blonde hair hanging down her back, was watching him out of a pair of startled gray eyes.

For a minute he thought he was back in the crowded courtroom and she had come down the aisle to put a hand on his shoulder and tell him not to give up.

She climbed into the wagon, a tall, well-formed girl in plaid shirt and waist overalls and boots. She lifted a tin cup of cool well water to his lips and he drank greedily for a moment. Then she pushed his head aside.

"Not too much," she warned.

He sat there hunched on the bench, staring. "Yours was the only face in that courtroom," he said after a moment, "that showed any pity at all."

She said, "It wasn't the killing of Smiley Haddon that turned the people against you. It was the way you killed him."

His sun-blackened face, streaked with dust that had dried in the perspiration, turned into a mask of sudden anger. "That's why Deshard killed him that way. He wanted to be sure they'd hang me."

She gave him a strange look with her gray eyes. Her voice edged with bitterness, she said, "It's a wonder to me that someone hasn't killed Haddon long before this." She looked back toward the house and seemed about to say something, then changed her mind. She left the wagon, clambering over the tail gate, and in a few minutes returned with a plate of food.

"The sheriff, it seems," she said wryly, "thinks you're desperate. He won't free your hands. I'll have to feed you."

"I am desperate," he told her, his lips barely moving. "I'm no different than anybody else. I don't want to die, least of all for something I didn't do."

She lowered her blonde head and passed a forkful of beans and bacon to him. When he tried to eat, his throat tightened so that he had to beg for water.

But before she could hand him the dipper, faces appeared abruptly at the end of the wagon: the sheriff and his deputy, and a gray-haired man with a lean brown face.

"Anne," the man said angrily. "Get out of there! A woman's got no right to be with a killer!"

At the sound of her father's voice, Anne turned, saying, "You don't understand, Dad."

"You heard me!" Cutler cried. "Nobody had much use for Haddon, but just the same this man murdered him."

Instead of obeying, she now stood straight with her yellow head touching the tarp. "How would you have felt," she said softly, "if it had been me who killed Haddon?"

"You!" Cutler said, staring.

"Or you, Dad." She pushed up the sleeve of her plaid shirt where they could see an ugly bruise, the marks of a man's blunt fingers plainly outlined.

"Where'd you get that?" her father demanded.

"Last week when you were at the association meeting. A man found me here alone—Smiley Haddon. I couldn't get to a gun or I would have killed him." Her voice quavered. "If it hadn't been for the dog—" She put her hands to her face in sudden embarrassment, then looked up at them, "I was afraid to tell you, Dad. Afraid that you would do what this Sam Wingate is accused of doing. Kill Haddon."

Bert Cutler's lean face was ashen. Fat Charlie Nagle shuffled nervously and said, "Now we ain't goin' to have no trouble over this. The prisoner's been found guilty and that's the way she stands."

Anne clenched her small hands into fists. "Are you sure he's guilty?" she cried. "Are you sure that a man named Lon Deshard didn't do it?"

"Now wait a minute, Ma'am," the sheriff said, red-faced. "I reckon Wingate's been tellin' you his sad tale. I got to say there ain't a word of truth to it. Why would Deshard kill his own partner? Him and Haddon was livin' in a shack on some land that Wingate owned. It made Wingate sore. He jumped 'em in town behind Jensen's Stable. Then Wingate follows Haddon out of town and does him in. Believe me, Ma'am, I heard the whole story, and that's the way she is."

Bert Cutler bowed his gray head, saying, "No matter how we might feel personally about this, Anne, you can't condone murder."

"What if some proof of Wingate's innocence could be produced?" Anne asked suddenly.

The sheriff's small eyes darkened. "What do you mean—proof?"

Anne's face whitened under his suspicious eyes, and she said, "I meant nothing at all. Forget it."

"Come on, Sheriff," Cutler said wearily, "and finish your supper. I'll feed the prisoner."

"Reckon not," the sheriff said. "We'll feed him later. The likes of him deserves no consideration. I tell you, the citizens of Tuscabelle are bent on seein' a hangin'. They aren't goin' to be disappointed."

SAM WINGATE felt the full weight of hopelessness settle on him as once again he was left alone in the wagon. For a minute he had

thought that pehaps with the pressure of Anne and her father the sheriff might—

Then he bitterly shrugged off the thought. There would be no new trial, no chance to clear himself. The citizens of Tuscabelle were not to be denied their vengeance against the very name of Wingate.

He heard a noise under the wagon and he tilted his head, the breath stilling in his tight chest. The noise came again and with it the whine of the dog that had done the barking when they first pulled into the ranchyard. The animal was worrying something under there by the sounds, probably an old bone.

In a little while the sheriff and his deputy came out of the house and the wagon again started to move. Sam Wingate tried to catch a glimpse of Anne Cutler through the back of the wagon but she was not in sight. In these last days of his life he would remember the deep compassion in her gray eyes.

Into the merciful coolness of early evening the wagon rolled. The ache in his shoulders spread down his back. If he could only straighten up on the bench, just once. As the thought came to him instinctively he raised his shoulders. Surprise flooded through him when he felt the give of the chain.

Dumbly he stared at the floorboards. The ring that had held him chained to the floor dangled free at the end of his chain. His chest tightened as realization broke over him. Somehow the bolt holding that ring had come loose.

Slowly he edged off the bench. With his ankles and wrists still manacled he was helpless. He fell forward off the bench, taking the full shock of his weight on one shoulder. He lay there sweating, straining to hear the reassurance of those voices on the seat above.

But the sheriff and his deputy kept on chattering and Sam knew he had not been heard.

Slowly he crawled toward the end gate and went over it head first into the hot sand. For a long moment he lay there against the ground that still held the day's heat. To the west the sky was a blood red. A faint star began to shimmer in the east. He raised his head, seeing the blocky shadow of the wagon disappearing over the hump of land that lay straight ahead.

AFTER three attempts he managed to get on his feet, but his legs, cramped from the long hours on the bench, had no feeling in them and would not support his weight. If he lay here in the sand exposed to the full heat of the sun on the morrow it would kill him. Which was better, that or the rope? He shuddered at the choice, knowing any minute the sheriff might miss him.

"Sam Wingate!" It was the girl's voice. Then she was crouching at his side, her face a pale oval in the moonlight.

"We've got to get you away before you're missed," she said tensely. "Nagle plans to spend the night at Randall's place five miles down the road. He'll miss you then and come looking."

Sam Wingate's lips lost their stiffness and he smiled for the first time since this awful thing had happened. "It wasn't the dog I heard under the wagon," he said wearily. "You unscrewed the bolt holding the ring in the floorboards. You did that for me."

Then he saw she was holding two horses. When Anne tried to help him to his feet, he shook his head. "Get a rock," he told her quickly, breathless with the dim hope of freedom in his grasp. "Smash the padlock!"

He heard her scurrying around in the darkness, and in a few moments she returned with two heavy stones. She laid the padlock on one of them

Powerless to help, he had to sit with his manacled hands behind his back, listening to her beat on the padlock with a rock.

With his ears strained for any sound of the sheriff and his deputy, Sam Wingate prayed. Finally the padlock sprung open; Anne wrenched it free of the chain that held his ankles. The other end of the chain, still fastened to the manacles that held his hands, she wrapped around his waist. Then she helped him into the saddle of a docile gray.

When Anne mounted she led his horse off into the darkness. "I took both the horses," she told him. "Dad will have no way to follow when he finds I'm gone."

For two miles they rode while the moon pushed its golden path across the sky above the eastern hills. At the entrance to a rocky draw she called a halt and helped him from the saddle. She took a hacksaw from her saddlebags.

"I don't think anyone will find us this far from the road," she whispered and feverishly began to saw at the manacles.

The rasp of the sharp teeth on metal was the sweetest sound he had ever heard.

Once his breath caught as the horses whinnied and stomped the sandy ground with restless hoofs. She stopped sawing and snatched up a rifle she had taken from a saddle boot. With the wash of moonlight yellow against her hair, she waited there tensely.

At last he said, "It must have been a coyote that scared the horses."

It seemed to take her an hour to cut through the heavy steel. At last she finished and sank back with a sigh of exhaustion. Sam Wingate flexed his arms, reveling at the pain of cramped muscles, feeling free at last.

Then he reached over and took her hands, seeing how the palms were blistered. Suddenly a wave of emotion swept over him and he drew her close and held her, feeling her taut and rounded figure against his own. With the severed manacles dangling from each wrist, he lifted his hands to her face and her mouth on his was cool.

IN A MOMENT he stepped back, half expecting that she would slap his face, but she only stood there in the moon-swept darkness staring at him. Then she sank to the ground in weariness.

He caught up the reins of the gray and said, "Can I make the border by daylight?"

She still sat on the ground, her white face turned up to him. Her lips barely moved when she said, "You'll make it, Sam, if you head due south."

Sensing the disappointment in her voice, he said, "What about you?"

She gave a hopeless shrug. "It doesn't matter."

He stared at her a moment, his eyes puzzled. "I—I'd like to write you, Anne."

"No. Don't write—ever."

Her words caught him by surprise and he dropped the reins and pulled her erect. Almost savagely he said, "You want me to fight, to clear my name. Is that it?"

He saw her lips tighten. "Perhaps I'm only worried about myself. I helped a prisoner escape."

For a moment he watched her face, then he shook his head. "Your father won't talk. And no one can prove you helped me."

"Then there's nothing to worry about," she said bitterly.

Sensing what went on in her mind, he said, "Even if I did go back to Tuscabelle this thing would have to be done all over again. I'm not very brave, I guess. I wouldn't want to go through that again."

She turned her face away from his, looking toward the dark ridge of

hills. "Once a long time ago I asked my grandmother how I'd know when I met the right man. My grandmother said, 'When you find a man who is gentle and brave and who will never run from himself.' "

When she turned to her horse he caught her arm, saying, "Am I that man, Anne?"

"Almost, Sam. Almost." She studied him a moment, then added, "I was in town this morning and heard the sheriff say he intended stopping for supper at the Cutler ranch. I vowed then I would help you escape so you could fight them and make them all reverse their judgment of you."

Inwardly he knew she was right, knowing that if he ran now he would be running for the rest of his life. But in him also was a raw fear. But then he felt the strength in him as he saw her eyes on his and knew a bond had grown between them during those brief days when he had found her face turned his way, those days in the crowded courtroom.

He said, "Back at the ranch you mentioned something about proof. Is there some way you know I didn't kill Haddon?"

"I only know of a reason why Lon Deshard might have wanted to murder his partner and see you hang."

She put a hand into her shirt and drew out a sheet of paper. He had no matches, but holding the paper to the moonlight he caught the words: *Assay Report. Silver.* On the Wingate forty acres.

"Haddon dropped it the other night," she said bitterly and rubbed the bruised place on her arm where Haddon tried to grab her.

It was then that the horses whinnied again. Sam stiffened at the sound, fear thrusting up in him. Quickly he pushed Anne behind him. A man stood in the clearing, holding a rifle. There was no mistaking the slouch figure of Lon Deshard.

"Two birds," Lon Deshard said, "with one stone. The assay report and you, Wingate."

Sam said, holding Anne firmly behind him, "You followed the wagon. You been following it all the time."

"Sure. Any man going to hang for something he didn't do would be desperate. Even though that fool Nagle had you chained I figured you might try to make a break. I wanted to be sure you got to the prison for the hangin'."

Feeling Anne tremble against him, Sam Wingate said, "And you knew Haddon lost the paper at the girl's place the other night."

"I figured as much," the man drawled. "Haddon said it was too bad she had a dog. He was still carryin' the teeth marks in his legs when I killed him." Deshard's voice hardened as he added, "Back at the ranch when the gal said she had proof, I figured she either had the assay report or knew where it was. As I said, two birds with one stone."

"You've the same as confessed murder," Sam Wingate said in a dry throat.

Deshard said, "Stand aside, Wingate," and lifted his rifle. "I don't want the girl hurt—yet."

Suddenly Anne stepped in front of Sam. "If you're going to kill us," she said, her voice breaking, "kill us together. I don't want to be left alive with you."

"Stand aside, Wingate," Deshard snarled. When Sam made no move to obey, Deshard stepped forward and reached out a hand to pull Anne aside.

In that moment Sam knocked her flying into the sand with a sweep of his left arm. In the same moment he went hurtling into Deshard, hearing the roar of the rifle. He felt a blinding stab of pain along his back. They both fell to the ground. It was only the thought that even if he had to die he couldn't leave Anne alone with this man that gave Sam strength

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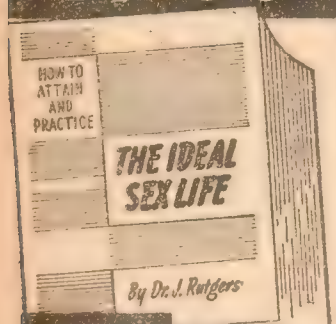

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enough to reach Deshard. Even with the wind knocked out of him, Deshard fought desperately. But Sam tore at his mouth with clawing fingers, at his eyes. He found Deshard's throat. He slammed the man's head against the ground, hard. Suddenly Deshard went limp.

SAM WINGATE awoke to find himself lying on his stomach. Anne was pressing his shirt into a crude bandage along that streak of fire on his back.

Seeing he was conscious, Anne gave a little sigh. "That bullet came so very close to your spine," she said, choking.

He saw Deshard lying limp in the sand. Anne had cut the reins from one of the horses and tied him hand and foot.

After a moment when he had caught his breath and steeled himself against the pain of his flesh wound he turned to Anne."When this is over, I'd like you to come to California with me."

She shook her blonde head at him, smiling down in the moonlight. "The Wingates were once a great family here. Make people learn to again respect the name."

"It's not going to be easy," he said after a moment. "And what will it gain?"

"It will gain a lot of things. I don't want a man who runs away from himself." He tried to turn, to catch her hands. She said, "Lie still, Sam. It will be all right now. I hear riders on the road."

She picked up the rifle and fired it into the sky.

.44 FOR A STRANGER

(*Continued from page* 89)

Wallow thought the gun business was over, that Montana had done the job expected of him. Then he saw Montana sprawled on the floor and knew what he was up against. His eyes came up to the bloody-faced kid standing in the middle of the room. Wallow snatched at his gun, triggered it blindly.

The kid fired his second and last shot.

When the smoke had cleared away he could see Wallow on the floor beside Montana. He took a deep breath. His hand came up and wiped the sweat and the blood from his eyes.

The job was done. Only one other thing remained to be finished here in this town.

The girl came into the main room on her tiptoes, walking as if she was scared to put one foot ahead of the other. She saw the two bodies there on the floor. All color left her face. Then she saw the kid standing in the middle of the room. She stopped still, as if she could not believe her eyes, she stared at him.

Tad saw her there. He took off his hat. There was something he wanted to say to this girl, if only he could think what it was, something about a ranch in Texas. He tried to remember.

Oh, yes, she had said she wanted to live on a ranch. He tried to think next of the words he wanted to say.

She came closer to him, put out a tentative hand and touched him. "You're alive," she whispered, as if this was a miracle.

"Why, yes," he said. But this was not what he wanted to say. There was something— He thought what it was. "Come morning," he said. "Come morning, I'm riding south."

"Yes," she said. But she did not seem to know what he meant.

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"It'll be a lonely ride down that way," he said, trying to explain.

"Yes?" she answered. It was more of a question than a statement.

This wasn't right, he knew. Somehow he hadn't said it the way he wanted to, somehow in the desperation of this moment he hadn't gotten the right words. He tried to think what they might be.

"It wouldn't be near so lonely if you were riding with me," he said. Were these the right words?

She moved closer to him, but she didn't speak. He wondered why she didn't. Surely she must know what he meant. Then he remembered something she had once said, about it being hard to tell what was in the secret heart of a man.

"As my wife, of course," he said.

Her face changed then. Her eyes changed. Some of the fear and the suspicion went out of them.

"I'd consider it a privilege," she said. "To ride south with you that way." Suddenly she was very close to him and he was holding her trembling body in the crook of his left arm and he was saying: "It's all right, honey. You don't have to worry a bit more, about anything. My folks will be mighty glad to have a girl like you."

"Will they?" she asked.

"They sure will," he answered.

"Will you?" she asked.

"I'll be more than glad, I'll be honored," he said. "Tomorrow morning—" They moved together toward the door.

At the door the kid paused, remembering something he had forgotten. He turned back into the saloon. The wooden-faced cowboy had not moved yet. He wondered what kind of nerves this man had to stand here through all the shooting. But whatever kind of nerves the cowboy had, he was obligated to the man.

"Thank you for the gun," he said. "It's a mighty good gun." Gravely he extended it butt first toward its owner.

"You keep it," the cowboy said. "You can use it better than I can." The wooden face broke and a grin struggled to appear. "Better than any man I have ever seen," the cowboy said.

"Thank you," the kid said. *Man*, the man had said. *Man!* Together he and the girl moved through the door and out into the night.

BRAND OF THE CAPROCK BREED

(*Continued from page* 37)

whatever he had done, it had been Seven-O. I wanted them to see that.

"Tanner havin' a hard go?" John W. shot at Miles.

"Starvin'."

Those black eagle eyes stitched some more and the mustaches wagged.

"Send him over a hundred cows. Our best 'uns."

John W. looked down at me some more. I wasn't very happy-looking, I guess. I didn't know what to do with my hand or myself. All I could see was Addie. That, and Gotch. But it was written all over me. I didn't need to tell John W. that I had killed a man.

"We'll need a line rider down here," John W. said shortly. "Somebody range sharp and mature, to look after this lower pasture. And keep an eye on the Tanners."

Miles looked off.

"Jim!" barked John W. "You clean out this pig-pen shack. I'll send your gear down."

"Yes, sir," I said.

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"Range Hogs, Beware!"

(*Continued from page 44*)

Fowler's places. Maybe he could get enough men together before Jason McCullough and his men rode down on the Rocking K. When they knew they'd lost him in the mountains, his own spread would be the next place they'd hit, Bart guessed.

He was approaching the ranch-house from the rear. A thin curl of smoke rose from the chimney. Old Sam, the cook, must be fixin' breakfast.

As he neared the bunkhouse, he could see no other signs of life. Probably his two waddies were out doin' some branding.

He let himself off easy at the corral. He'd been raised to think of his horse first. When he touched the ground, his knees jacked and a sharp, quick stab raced up into his chest. He steadied himself for a minute, gripping the saddle cantle. Then when his legs would support him, he loosened the cinch and pulled the saddle onto the corral railing. Then he slipped off the bridle and slapped the bay's rump. The horse trotted over to the hayrack.

Bart Fleming was about to head for the house when he suddenly pulled up! There was something wrong! Today was Sunday! And this time of the year, his waddies didn't work on Sunday! Sunday morning usually found them lolling around the door of the bunkhouse, gassing!

He narrowed his eyes toward the house. There was no sign a man could tell from—everything seemed to be all right, except it was too blamed quiet.

As quickly as he could, he moved over to the cover of the barn. He called, "Hyar, the house!"

In a few seconds, old Sam, the

cook, came to the front door. "Whut's the bellerin' about?" Sam said, ornery-like.

Bart Fleming breathed easier. There'd been no basis to his fears. He smiled thinly to himself and started for the house. Sam disappeared inside once more.

He stepped on the porch, his fears suddenly aroused again by some sixth sense. But again, he shrugged them away and walked across the porch and in the front door.

He was half inside when he felt the gun jammed into his ribs. "Just take it easy, feller." It was Arne Phillips who spoke. Phillips had the hammer of his big six eared back, way back. One move would have blasted out Bart's middle.

Phillips relieved him of his gun. Bart took in the situation at a glance. Jason McCullough sat in the old leather armchair, a gun trained on old Sam. McCullough was a homely man, thin, with straight black hair and thick lips. It was said that he and his half-brother, Arne Phillips, never changed clothes, and Bart could well believe it. They were thick with dirt and grease.

McCullough's heavy lips curled in a humorless smile. "Figured we might not 'uv got yuh down by the barn," he said, "too far fer straight shootin'."

"Figured too we'd just let you come to us," Phillips added. "Friend Sam here did just what we told him."

"He'd 'uv got a slug in his ornery guts if he hadn't," McCullough supplied. He found humor in the situation. He guffawed.

"What have you done with my other two waddies?" Bart demanded, his lips tight across his teeth.

"Why I reckon they spent a nice quiet night in the bunkhouse," McCullough said. "We tied 'em up and been waiting fer yuh here since last night."

Bart Fleming understood then.

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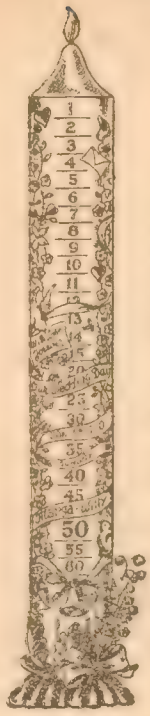

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Pere Francis and the Hourglass punchers had gone to the hills after him. McCullough and Phillips had come here in case he doubled back. He cursed himself silently for his stupidity. It's what he'd have done himself had he been in McCullough's place.

"Yuh wouldn't leave the valley the easy way," McCullough continued, "so it looks like yuh'll be checking out the hard way."

Bart faced his position squarely. He didn't know what he could do. He forced himself to ignore the pain that was starting in his side once more. He had to stall for time, think of something. He said, "I'm hungry. I ain't et since yesterday morning. Leastwise you could let a man have a meal."

Arne Phillips raised his gun. "Yuh didn't let Deak Jaggert have a meal. I liked Deak better alive than dead."

"Let 'em eat," McCullough said. "There ain't no harm in that."

Bart said, "Jaggert bit off more'n he could chew. He wasn't fast enough."

Phillips spluttered, "Why, I'll—"

"Let 'em eat," McCullough snapped impatiently. "There ain't no hurry."

PHILLIPS subsided with a growl and McCullough nodded to old Sam. The latter went into the kitchen and started banging pans. Bart went over and eased himself into a chair. Only sheer guts kept him going.

Presently the aroma of frying bacon and eggs came from the kitchen. Then there was more banging and the aroma of coffee permeated the room.

McCullough snapped, "Hungry myself. Put on for two more, cook!"

Sam stuck his head through the door and scowled. "You heerd him," Arne Phillips said. "An' make plenty. That grub at the Hourglass ain't so good."

Old Sam vanished back into the

kitchen and soon came out bearing tin plates. He slapped them on the table with a dark mutter. "Hope yuh choke on it."

Sam came again and slapped the coffee pot on the center of the table. McCullough and Phillips got up and took their places. "Hawgs!" old Sam muttered. Phillips ignored him and pushed his plate around to the end of the table. "You sit there," he said, indicating the opposite end. "I'll just keep an eye on yuh." He planted his big six-shooter beside his plate and picked up knife and fork.

Then old Sam came in bearing a big platter heaped high with bacon and eggs and fried potatoes. Bart got up and went to the place Phillips had indicated.

He saw the gun on the table and McCullough and Phillips digging into the food with both hands. It was now or never, he knew. He'd have to move fast. He hoped Sam would have enough sense to know what to do.

As Sam came in with the hot biscuits, Bart pulled back the chair as if to sit down. Instead he grabbed his end of the table and gave it a mighty heave upward. He felt a pain tear at his guts and the gunshot wound.

Everything went flying. There were hoarse yells of surprise from Phillips and McCullough changing to howls of pain as the hot coffee spilled over them.

Bart saw Phillips' gun go skidding onto the floor. He dived under the table. Then he was on his hands and knees, trying to crawl through the confusion, trying to reach the gun.

He lashed out with his leg and knocked McCullough's feet from under him. The man went sprawling.

Old Sam gave out a yelp of surprise. Bart's fingers were inches from the gun when Phillips kicked. The man's foot caught Bart in the side of the head, and sudden bright stars danced madly before his eyes.

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Phillips was reaching for the gun when old Sam jumped. The old cook hurled himself forward, catching Phillips in the small of the back.

Phillips gave a grunt and went headlong. Then Bart Fleming's fingers closed on the gun. It was hard and cold and heavy in his fist. He rolled, fast, swung the weapon up.

Jason McCullough had his gun in hand now. He fired as Bart moved. There was a thunderous roar and splinters stung Bart's face as the slug plowed the floor where he'd been.

Then McCullough was in his sights. Half-lying, half-sitting, Bart slapped the six twice in a quick fan. Not ten feet away, McCullough took the bullets in his chest. He hunched forward, the air going out of him in an awful wheezing gasp.

The gun dropped from McCullough's nerveless fingers. The look of blank astonishment turned to one of horror. McCullough tried to say something but no words came. His lips dribbled awkwardly. And then the man fell.

IT HAD been a matter of seconds. Bart twisted on the floor where Arne Phillips was struggling with old Sam. The man was trying to shake Sam off, but old Sam wasn't shaking. He held on tight.

Bart crawled over and brought the barrel of the six down with a crunching smack above Arne Phillips' ear. All fight went out of the man then, and he sank to the floor in a senseless heap.

Old Sam got up, shaking himself like a wet dog. "Reckon I'm still scrappy in spite o' my age," he said grimly.

Bart grunted. He looked at the two men on the floor. Arne Phillips was gun fast, but Bart knew he wouldn't stay in the country with Jason McCullough dead. Phillips didn't have the guts for that.

For a long minute, Bart looked at the gun he still held in his hand, the barrel still hot. Then he threw it over on the leather armchair.

Old Sam saw the gesture, knew what it meant. The old cook had understood more than Bart realized, even though he never guessed what had happened seven years ago.

"Killin' ain't no good," old Sam said. "Ever. But there's times when a man has to stand on his own two hind legs. An' if he's fighting fer what's right—well, it's gotta be done. Some jaspers don't understand nothing else. Till they do, till range hogs like Jason McCullough know that, there'll be killing."

Bart nodded. "Better hightail it to the bunkhouse and let them two waddies loose," he said. "And send someone to town after Doc Hawkins."

Old Sam hurried out. Bart stood there, thinking what the old man had said. "If you're fighting for what's right—"

He licked dry lips. The aching, gnawing pain was starting again and made him dizzy. The long hours of punishment were catching up with him. A man can take about so much. But Doc Hawkins could fix him up all right. Doc understood gun wounds. Three, four weeks and Doc Hawkins would have him up and around again. With care, gunshot wounds healed.

He heard old Sam coming back. He unbuckled his gun belt and let it drop to the floor. He went to the old leather sofa and lay down. Maybe old Sam was right. Maybe he was. He no longer felt the gun belt around him. Somehow it was better. It was like another, older wound starting to heal.

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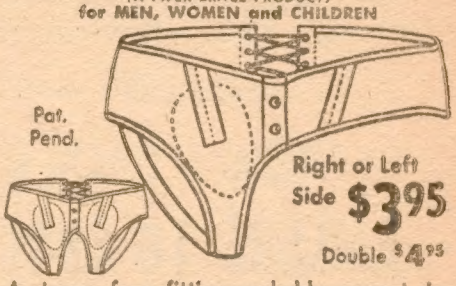

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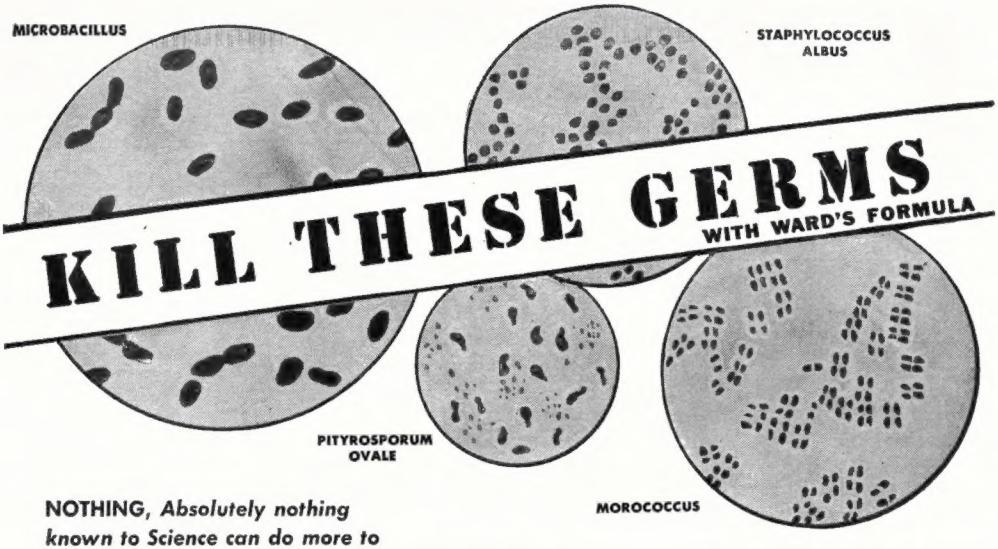

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